

UNCLE ABNER
The Devil's Tools

MELVILLE DAVISSON POST



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The Devil's Tools

I WAS ABOUT to follow my Uncle Abner into the garden when at a turn of the hedge, I stopped. A step or two beyond me in the sun, screened by a lattice of vines, was a scene that filled me full of wonder. Abner was standing quite still in the path, and a girl was clinging to his arm, with her face buried against his coat. There was no sound, but the girl's hands trembled and her shoulders were convulsed with sobs.

Whenever I think of pretty women, even now, I somehow always begin with Betty Randolph, and yet, I cannot put her before the eye, for all the memories. She remains in the fairy-land of youth, and her description is with the poets; their extravagances intrude and possess me, and I give it up.

I cannot say that a woman is an armful of apple blossoms, as they do, or as white as milk, and as playful as a kitten. These are happy collocations of words and quite descriptive of her, but they are not mine. Nor can I draw her in the language of a civilization to which she does not belong—one of wheels and spindles with its own type; superior, no doubt, but less desirable, I fancy. The age that grew its women in romance and dowered them with poetic fancies was not so impracticable as you think. It is a queer world; those who put their faith in the plow are rewarded by the plow, and those who put their faith in miracles are rewarded by miracles.

I remained in the shelter of the hedge in some considerable wonder. We had come to pay our respects to this young woman on her approaching marriage, and to be received like this was somewhat beyond our expectations. There could be nothing in this marriage on which to found a tragedy of tears. It was a love match if ever there was one.

Edward Duncan was a fine figure of a man; his lands

adjoined, and he had ancestors enough for Randolph. He stood high in the hills, but I did not like him. You will smile at that, seeing what I have written of Betty Randolph, and remembering how, at ten, the human heart is desperately jealous.

The two had been mated by the county gossips from the cradle, and had lived the prophecy. The romance, too, had got its tang of denial to make it sharper. The young man had bought his lands and builded his house, but he must pay for them before he took his bride in, Randolph said, and he had stood by that condition.

There had been some years of waiting, and Randolph had been stormed. The debt had been reduced, but a mortgage remained, until now, by chance, it had been removed, and the gates of Paradise were opened. Edward Duncan had a tract of wild land in the edge of Maryland which his father had got for a song at a judicial sale. He had sold this land, he said, to a foreign purchaser, and so got the money to clear off his debt. He had written to Betty, who was in Baltimore at the time, and she had hurried back with frocks and furbelows. The day was set, we had come to see how happy she would be, and here she was clinging to my Uncle Abner's arm and crying like her heart would break.

It was some time before the girl spoke, and Abner stood caressing her hair, as though she were a little child. When the paroxysms of tears was over she told him what distressed her, and I heard the story, for the turn of the hedge was beside them, and I could have touched the girl with my hand. She took a worn ribbon from around her neck and held it out to Abner. There was a heavy gold cross slung to it on a tiny ring. I knew this cross, as every one did; it had been her mother's, and the three big emeralds set in it were of the few fine gems in the county. They were worth five thousand dollars, and had been passed down from the divided heirlooms of an English grandmother. I knew what the matter was before Betty Randolph said it. The emeralds were gone. The cross lying in her hand was bare.

She told the story in a dozen words. The jewels had been gone for some time, but her father had not known it until

to-day. She had hoped he would never know, but by accident he had found it out. Then he had called an inquisition, and sat down to discover who had done the robbery. And here it was that Betty Randolph's greatest grief came in. The loss of the emeralds was enough; but to have her old Mammy Liza, who had been the only mother that she could remember, singled out and interrogated for the criminal, was too much to be borne. Her father was now in his office proceeding with the outrage. Would my Uncle Abner go and see him before he broke her heart?

Abner took the cross and held it in his hand. He asked a question or two, but, on the whole, he said very little, which seemed strange to me, with the matter to clear up. How long had the emeralds been missing? And she replied that they had been in the cross before her trip to Baltimore, and missing at her return. She had not taken the cross on the journey. It had remained among her possessions in her room. She did not know when she had seen it on her return.

And she began once more to cry, and her dainty mouth to tremble, and the big tears to gather in her brown eyes.

Abner promised to go in and brave Randolph at his inquisition, and bring Mammy Liza out. He bade Betty walk in the garden until he returned, and she went away comforted.

But Abner did not at once go in. He remained for some moments standing there with the cross in his hand; then, to my surprise, he turned about and went back the way that he had come. I had barely time to get out of his way, for he walked swiftly along the path to the gate, and down to the stable. I followed, for I wondered why he went here instead of to the house, as he had promised. He crossed before the stables and entered a big shed where the plows and farm tools were kept, the scythes hung up, and the corn hoes. The shed was of huge logs, roofed with clapboards, and open at each end.

I lost a little time in making a detour around the stable, but when I looked into the shed between a crack of the logs, my Uncle Abner was sitting before the big grindstone, turning it with his foot, and very delicately holding the cross on the edge of the stone. He paused and examined his work, and

then continued. I could not understand what he was at. Why had he come here, and why did he grind the cross on the stone? At any rate, he presently stopped, looked about until he found a piece of old leather, and again sat down to rub the cross, as though to polish what he had ground.

He examined his work from time to time, until at last it pleased him, and he got up. He went out of the shed and up the path toward the garden. I knew where he was going now and I took some short cuts.

Randolph's office was a wing built on to the main residence, after the fashion of the old Virginia mansion house. It was a single story with a separate entrance, so arranged that the master of the house could receive his official visitors and transact his business without disturbing his domestic household.

I was a very good Indian at that period of my life, and skilled in the acts of taking cover. I was ten years old and had lived the life of the Mohawk, with much care for accuracy of detail. True, it was a life I had now given up for larger affairs, but I retained its advantages. One does not spend whole afternoons at the blood-thirsty age of five, in stalking the turkeycock in the wooded pasture, noiselessly on his belly, with his wooden knife in his hand, and not come to the maturity of ten with the accomplishments of Uncas.

I was presently in a snowball bush, with a very good view of Randolph's inquisition, and I think that if Betty had waited to see it, she need not have gone away in so great a grief. Randolph was sitting behind his table in his pompous manner and with the dignity of kings. But for all his attitudes, he took no advantage over Mammy Liza.

The old woman sat beyond him, straight as a rod in her chair, her black silk dress smoothed into straight folds, her white cap prim and immaculate, her square-rimmed spectacles on her nose, and her hands in her lap. If there was royal blood on the Congo, she carried it in her veins, for her dignity was real. And there I think she held Randolph back from any definite accusation. He advanced with specious and sententious innuendoes and arguments, *a priori* and conclusion *post hoc ergo propter hoc* to inclose her as the guilty agent. But

from the commanding position of a blameless life, she did not see it, and he could not make her see it. She regarded this conference as that of two important persons in convention assembled,—a meeting together of the heads of the House of Randolph to consider a certain matter touching its goods and its honor. And, for all his efforts, he could not dislodge her from the serenity of that position.

"Your room adjoins Betty's?" he said.

"Yes, Mars Ran," she answered. "I's always slep' next to my chile, ever since her ma handed her to me outen the bed she was borned in."

"And no one goes into her room but you?"

"No, sah, 'ceptin' when I's there to see what they's doin'."

"Then no other servant in this house could have taken anything out of Betty's room without your knowing it?"

"That's right, Mars Ran. I'd 'a' knowed it."

"Then," said Randolph, tightening the lines of his premises, "if you alone have access to the room, and no one goes in without your consent or knowledge, how could any other servant in this house have taken these jewels?"

"They didn't!" said the old woman. "I's done had all the niggers up before me, an' I's ravaged 'em an' searchified 'em."

Her mouth tightened with the savage memory.

"I knows 'em! I knows 'em all—mopin' niggers, an' mealy mouthed niggers, an' shoutin' niggers, an' cussin' niggers, an' I knows all their carryin's-on, an' all their underhan' oneryness, an' all their low-down contraptions. An' they knows I knows it." She paused and lifted a long, black finger.

"They fools Miss Betty, an' they fools you, Mars Ran, but they don't fool Mammy Liza."

She replaced her hands together primly in the lap of her silk dress and continued in a confidential tone.

"'Course we knows niggers steals, but they steals eatables, an' nobody pays any 'tention to that. Your Grandpap never did, nor your pap, nor us. You can't be too hard on niggers, jist as you can't be too easy on 'em. If you's too hard, they gits down in the mouth, an' if you's too easy they takes the place. A down in the mouth nigger is always a wuthless nigger, an' a biggity nigger is a 'bomination!"

She paused a moment, but she had entered upon her discourse, and she continued.

"I ain't specifyin' but what there's some on this place that would b'ar watchin', an' I's had my eye on 'em; but they's like the unthinking horse, they'd slip a fril-fral outen the kitchen, or a side of bacon outen the smoke-house, but they wouldn't do none of your gran' stealin'.

"No, sah! No, sah! Mars Ran, them jules wasn't took by nobody in this house."

She paused and reflected, and her face filled with the energy of battle.

"I'd jist like to see a nigger tech a whip-stitch that belongs to my chile. I'd shore peel the hide offen 'em. Tech it! No, sah, they ain't no nigger on this place that's a-goin' to rile me."

And in her energy she told Randolph some homely truths.

"They ain't afeared of you, Mars Ran, 'cause they knows they can make up some cock an' bull story to fool you; an' they ain't afeared of Miss Betty 'cause they knows they can whip it 'roun' her with a pitiful face; but I's different. I rules 'em with the weepen of iron! They ain't none of 'em that can stand up before me with a lie, for I knows the innermost and hidden searchings of a nigger."

She extended her clenched hand with a savage gesture.

"An' I tells 'em, Mars Ran'll welt you with a withe, but I'll scarify you with a scorpeen!"

It was at this moment that my Uncle Abner entered.

Mammy Liza immediately assumed her company manners. She rose and made a little courtesy.

"'Eben', Mars Abner," she said; "is you all well?"

Abner replied, and Randolph came forward to receive him. He got my uncle a chair, and began to explain the matter with which he was engaged. Abner said that he had already got the story from Betty.

Randolph went back to his place behind the table, and to his judicial attitudes.

"There is no direct evidence bearing upon this robbery," he said, "consequently, in pursuing an investigation of it, we must follow the established and orderly formula laid down

by the law writers. We must carefully scrutinize all the circumstances of time, place, motive, means, opportunity, and conduct. And, while upon a trial, a judge must assume the innocence of everybody indicated, upon an investigation, the inquisitor must assume their guilt."

He compressed his lips and continued with exalted dignity.

"No one is to be exempt from consideration, not even the oldest and most trusted servants. The wisdom of this course was strikingly shown in Lord William Russell's case, where the facts indicated suicide, but a rigid application of this rule demonstrated that my Lord Russell had been, in fact, murdered by his valet."

My uncle did not interrupt. But Mammy Liza could not restrain her enthusiasm. She was very proud of Randolph, and, like all Negroes, associated ability with high sounding words. His grandiloquence and his pomposity were her delight. Her eyes beamed with admiration.

"Go on, Mars Ran," she said; "you certainly is a gran' talker."

Randolph banged the table.

"Shut up!" he roared. "A man can't open his mouth in this house without being interrupted."

But Mammy Liza only beamed serenely. She was accustomed to these outbursts of her lord, and unembarrassed by them. She sat primly in her chair with the radiance of the beloved disciple.

It is one of the excellences of vanity that it cannot be overthrown by a chance blow. However desperately rammed, it always topples back upon its pedestal. Another would have gone hopelessly to wreckage under that, but not Randolph. He continued in his finest manner.

"Bearing this in mind," he said, "let us analyze the indicatory circumstances. It is possible, of course, that a criminal agent may plan his crime with skill, execute it without accident, and maintain the secret with equanimity, and that all interrogation following upon his act, will be wholly futile; but this is not usually true, as was conspicuously evidenced in Sir Ashby Cooper's case."

He paused and put the tips of his extended fingers together.

"What have we here to indicate the criminal agent? No human eye has seen the robber at his work, and there are no witnesses to speak; but we are not to abandon our investigation for that. The writers on the law tell us that circumstantial evidence in the case of crimes committed in secret is the most satisfactory from which to draw conclusions of guilt, for men may be seduced to perjury from base motives, but facts, as Mr. Baron Legg so aptly puts it, 'cannot lie.'"

He made a large indicatory gesture toward his bookshelf.

"True," he said, "I would not go so far as Mr. Justice Butler in Donellan's case. I would not hold circumstantial evidence to be superior to direct evidence, nor would I take the position that it is wholly beyond the reach and compass of human abilities to invent a train of circumstances that might deceive the ordinary inexperienced magistrate. I would recall the Vroom case, and the lamentable error of Sir Matthew Hale, in hanging some sailors for the murder of a shipmate who was, in fact, not dead. But even that error, sir," and he addressed my uncle directly in the heat and eloquence of his oration, "if in the law one may ever take an illustration from the poets, bore a jewel in its head. It gave us Hale's Rule."

He paused for emphasis, and my uncle spoke.

"And what was that rule?" he said.

"That rule, sir," replied Randolph, "ought not to be stated from memory. It is a nefarious practice of our judges, whereby errors creep into the sound text. It should be read as it stands, sir, in the elegant language of Sir Matthew."

"Leaving out the elegant language of Sir Matthew," replied Abner, "what does the rule mean?"

"In substance and effect," continued Randolph, "but by no means in these words, the rule directs the magistrate to be first certain that a crime has been committed before he undertakes to punish anybody for it."

"Precisely!" said my uncle; "and it is the very best sense that I ever heard of in the law."

He held the gold cross out in his big palm.

"Take this case," he said. "What is the use to speculate

about who stole the emeralds, when it is certain that they have not been stolen!"

"Not stolen!" cried Randolph. "They are gone!"

"Yes," replied Abner, "they are gone, but they are not stolen. . . . I would ask you to consider this fact: If these emeralds had been stolen out of the cross, the tines of the metal which held the stones in place, would have been either broken off or pried up, and we would find either the new break in the metal, or the twisted projecting tines. . . . But, instead," he continued, "the points of the setting are all quite smooth. What does that indicate?"

Randolph took the cross and examined it with care.

"You are right, Abner," he said; "the settings are all worn away. I am not surprised; the cross is very old."

"And if the settings are worn away," continued my uncle, "what has become of the stones?"

Randolph banged the table with his clenched hand.

"They have fallen out. Lost! By gad, sir!"

My uncle leaned back in his chair, like one to whom a comment is superfluous. But Randolph delivered an oration. It was directed to Mammy Liza, and the tenor of it was felicitations upon the happy incident that turned aside suspicion from any member of his household. He grew eloquent, pictured his distress, and how his stern, impartial sense of justice had restrained it, and finally, with what seigniorial joy he now received the truth.

And the old woman sat under it in ecstatic rapture. She made little audible sighs and chirrups. Her elbows were lifted and she moved her body rhythmically to the swing of Randolph's periods. She was entranced at the eloquence, but the intent of Randolph's speech never reached her. She was beyond the acquittal, as she had been beyond the accusation.

She continued to bow radiantly after Randolph had made an end.

"Yes, sah," she said; "yes, sah, Mars Ran, I done tole you that them jules wan't took by none of *our* niggers."

But, as for me, I was overcome with wonder. Here was my uncle convincing Randolph by a piece of evidence which he,

himself, had deliberately manufactured on the face of the grindstone.

So that was what he had been at in the shed—grinding off the tines and polishing the settings with a piece of leather, so they would give the appearance of being worn. From my point of vantage in the snowball bush, I looked upon him with a growing interest. He sat, oblivious to Randolph's vaporings, looking beyond him, through the open window at the far-off green fields. He had taken these pains to acquit Mammy Liza. But some one was guilty then! And who? I got a hint of that within the next five minutes, and I was appalled.

"Liza," said Randolph, descending to the practical, "who sweeps Miss Betty's room?"

"Laws, Mars Ran," replied the old negro, "'course I does everything fo' my chile. The house niggers don't do nothin'—that is, they don't do nothin' 'thouten I sets an' watches 'em. I sets when they washes the winders, and I sets when they sweeps, an' I sets when they makes the bed up. I's been a-settin' there all the time Miss Betty's been gone, 'ceptin', of course, when Mars Cedward was there."

She paused and tittered.

"Bless my life, how young folks does carry on! Every day heah comes Mars Cedward a-ridin' up, an' he says, 'Howdy, Mammy, I reckon if I can't see Miss Betty, I'll have to run upstairs an' look at her Ma.' An' he lights offen his horse, 'Get your key, Mammy,' he says, 'an' open the sacred po'tals.' And I gets the key outen my pocket an' unlocks the do' an' he whippits in there to that little picture of Miss Betty's Ma, that hangs over her bureau."

The old woman paused and wiped a mist from her spectacles with an immaculate and carefully folded handkerchief.

"Yes, yes, sah, 'co'se Miss Betty does look like her Ma—she's the very spit-an'-image of her. . . . Well, I goes along back an' sets down on the stair-steps, an' waits till Mars Cedward gets done with his worshipin's, an' he comes along an' says, 'Thankee, Mammy, I reckon that'll have to last me until to-morrow,' an' then I goes back an' locks the do'. I's mighty keerful to lock do's. I ain't minded to have no 'quisitive nigger ramshakin' 'roun'."

But my uncle stopped her and sent her to Betty as evidence in the flesh that she had come acquit of Randolph's inquisition. And the two men fell into a talk upon other matters.

But I no longer listened. I sat within my bush and studied the impassive face of my Uncle Abner, and tried to join these contradictory incidents into something that I could understand. Slowly the thing came to me! But I did not push on into the inevitable conclusion. Its consequences were too appalling. I saw it and let it lie.

Somebody had pried the emeralds out of that cross,—somebody having access to the room. And that person was not Mammy Liza! Abner knew that. . . . And he deliberately falsified the evidence. To acquit Mammy Liza? Something more than that, I thought. She was in no danger; even Randolph behind his judicial attitudes, had never entertained the idea for a moment. Then, this thing meant that my uncle had deliberately screened the real criminal. But why? Abner was no respecter of men. He stood for justice—clean and ruthless justice, tempered by no distinctions. Why, then, indeed?

And then I had an inspiration. Abner was thinking of some one beyond the criminal, and of the consequences to that one if the truth were known; and this thing he had done, he had done for her! And now I thought about her, too.

Her faith, her trust, the dearest illusion of her life had been imperiled, had been destroyed, but for my uncle's firm, deliberate act.

And then, another thing rose up desperately before me. How could he let this girl go on in ignorance of the truth? Must he not, after all, tell her what he knew? And my tongue grew dry in contemplation of that ordeal. And yet again, why? Love of her had been ultimately the motive. She need never know, and the secret might live out everybody's life. Moreover, for all his iron ways, Abner was a man who saw justice in its large and human aspect, and he stood for the spirit, above the letter, of the truth.

And yet, even there under the limited horizon of a child, I seemed to feel that he must tell her. And so when he finally

got away from Randolph, and turned into the garden, I stalked him with desperate cunning. I was on fire to know what he would do. Would he speak? Or would he keep the thing forever silent? I had sat before two acts of this drama, and I would see what the curtains went down on. And I did see it from the shelter of the tall timothy-grass.

He found Betty at the foot of the garden. She ran to him in joy at Mammy Liza's vindication, and with pretty evidences of her affection. But he took her by the hand without a word and led her to a bench.

And when she was seated he sat down beside her. I could not see her face, but I could hear his voice and it was wonderfully kind.

"My child," he said, "there is always one reason, if no other, why good people must not undertake to work with a tool of the devil, and that reason is because they handle it so badly."

He paused and took the gold cross out of his pocket.

"Now here," he continued, "I have had to help somebody out who was the very poorest bungler with a devil's tool. I am not very skilled myself with that sort of an implement, but, dear me, I am not so bad a workman as this person! . . . Let me show you. . . . The one who got the emeralds out of this cross left the twisted and broken tines to indicate a deliberate criminal act, so I had to grind them off in order that the thing might look like an accident. . . . That cleared everybody—Mammy Liza, who had no motive for this act, and Edward Duncan, who had."

The girl stood straight up.

"Oh," she said, and her voice was a long shuddering whisper, "no one could think he did it!"

"And why not?" continued my uncle. "He had the opportunity and the motive. He was in the room during your absence, and he needed the money which those emeralds would bring in order to clear his lands of debt."

The girl clenched her hands and drew them in against her heart.

"But you don't think he stole them?" And again her voice was in that shuddering whisper.

I lay trembling.

"No," replied Abner, "I do not think that Edward Duncan stole these emeralds, because I know that they were never stolen at all."

He put out his hand and drew the girl down beside him.

"My child," he continued, "we must always credit the poorest thief with some glimmering of intelligence. When I first saw this cross in your hand, I knew that this was not the work of a thief, because no thief would have painfully pried the emeralds out, in order to leave the cross behind as an evidence of his guilt. Now, there is a reason why this cross was left behind, but it is not the reason of a thief—two reasons, in fact: because some one wished to keep it, and because they were not afraid to do so.

"Now, my child," and Abner put his arm tenderly around the girl's shoulders, "who could that person be who treasured this cross and was not afraid to keep it?"

She clung to my uncle then, and I heard the confession among her sobbings. Edward Duncan was making every sacrifice for her, and she had made one for him. She had sold the emeralds in Baltimore, and through an agent, bought his mountain land. But he must never know, never in this world, and my Uncle Abner must promise her that upon his honor.

And lying in the deep timothy-grass, I heard him promise.

The Hidden Law

WE HAD COME out to Dudley Betts' house and were standing in a bit of meadow. It was an afternoon of April; there had been a shower of rain, and now the sun was on the velvet grass and the white-headed clover blossoms. The sky was blue above and the earth green below, and swimming between them was an air like lotus. Facing the south upon this sunny field was a stand of bees, thatched with rye-straw and covered over with a clapboard roof, the house of each tribe a section of a hollow gum-tree, with a cap on the top for the tribute of honey to the human tyrant. The bees had come out after the shower was gone, and they hummed at their work with the sound of a spinner.

Randolph stopped and looked down upon the humming hive. He lifted his finger with a little circling gesture.

"'Singing masons building roofs of gold,'" he said. "Ah, Abner, William of Avon was a great poet."

My uncle turned about at that and looked at Randolph and then at the hive of bees. A girl was coming up from the brook below with a pail of water. She wore a simple butternut frock, and she was clean-limbed and straight like those first daughters of the world who wove and spun. She paused before the hive and the bees swarmed about her as about a great clover blossom, and she was at home and unafraid like a child in a company of yellow butterflies. She went on to the spring house with her dripping wooden pail, kissing the tips of her fingers to the bees. We followed, but before the hive my uncle stopped and repeated the line that Randolph had quoted:

"'Singing masons building roofs of gold,' . . . and over a floor of gold and pillars of gold." He added, "He was a good riddle maker, your English poet, but not so good as Samson, unless I help him out."

I received the fairy fancy with all children's joy. Those little men singing as they laid their yellow floor, and raised their yellow walls, and arched their yellow roof! Singing! The word seemed to open up some sunlit fairy world.

It pleased Randolph to have thus touched my uncle.

"A great poet, Abner," he repeated, "and more than that; he drew lessons from nature valuable for doctrine. Men should hymn as they labor and fill the fields with song and so suck out the virus from the curse. He was a great philosopher, Abner—William of Avon."

"But not so great a philosopher as Saint Paul," replied Abner, and he turned from the bees toward old Dudley Betts, digging in the fields before his door. He put his hands behind him and lifted his stern bronze face.

"Those who coveted after money," he said, "have 'pierced themselves through with many sorrows.' And is it not the truth? Yonder is old Dudley Betts. He is doubled up with aches; he has lost his son; he is losing his life, and he will lose his soul—all for money—'Pierced themselves through with many sorrows,' as Saint Paul said it, and now, at the end he has lost the hoard that he slaved for."

The man was a by-word in the hills; mean and narrow, with an economy past belief. He used everything about him to one end and with no thought but gain. He cultivated his fields to the very door, and set his fences out into the road, and he extracted from those about him every tithe of service. He had worked his son until the boy had finally run away across the mountains. He had driven his daughter to the makeshifts of the first patriarchal people—soap from ashes, linen from hemp, and the wheel and the loom for the frock upon her limbs.

And like every man under a single dominating passion, he grew in suspicion and in fear. He was afraid to lend out his money lest he lose it. He had given so much for this treasure that he would take no chance with it, and so kept it by him in gold.

But caution and fear are not harpies to be halted; they wing on. Betts was dragged far in their claw-feet. There is a land of dim things that these convoys can enter. Betts arrived there. We must not press the earth too hard, old, forgotten

peoples believed, lest evil things are squeezed out that strip us and avenge it. And ancient crones, feeble, wrapped up by the fire, warned him: The earth suffered us to reap, but not to glean her. We must not gather up every head of wheat. The earth or dim creatures behind the earth would be offended. It was the oldest belief. The first men poured a little wine out when they drank and brought an offering of their herds and the first fruits of the fields. It was written in the Book. He could get it down and read it.

What did they know that they did this? Life was hard then; men saved all they could. There was some terrible experience behind this custom, some experience that appalled and stamped the race with a lesson!

At first Betts laughed at their warnings; then he cursed at them, and his changed manner marked how far he had got. The laugh meant disbelief, but the curse meant fear.

And now, the very strangest thing had happened: The treasure that the old man had so painfully laid up had mysteriously vanished clear away. No one knew it. Men like Betts, cautious and secretive, are dumb before disaster. They conceal the deep mortal hurt as though to hide it from themselves.

He had gone in the night and told Randolph and Abner, and now they had come to see his house.

He put down his hoe when we came up and led us in. It was a house like those of the first men, with everything in it home-made—hand-woven rag-carpet on the floor, and hand-woven coverlets on the beds; tables and shelves and benches of rude carpentry. These things spoke of the man's economy. But there were also things that spoke of his fear: The house was a primitive stockade. The door was barred with a beam, and there were heavy shutters at the window; an ax stood by the old man's bed and an ancient dueling pistol hung by its trigger-guard to a nail.

I did not go in, for youth is cunning. I sat down on the doorstep and fell into so close a study of a certain wasp at work under a sill that I was overlooked as a creature without ears; but I had ears of the finest and I lost no word.

The old man got two splint-bottom chairs and put them

by the table for his guests, and then he brought a blue earthen jar and set it before them. It was one of the old-fashioned glazed jars peddled by the hucksters, smaller but deeper than a crock, with a thick rim and two great ears. In this he kept his gold pieces until on a certain night they had vanished.

The old man's voice ran in and out of a whisper as he told the story. He knew the very night, because he looked into his jar before he slept and every morning when he got out of his bed. It had been a devil's night—streaming clouds drove across an iron sky, a thin crook of a moon sailed, and a high bitter wind scythed the earth.

Everybody remembered the night when he got out his almanac and named it. There had been noises, old Betts said, but he could not define them. Such a night is full of voices; the wind whispers in the chimney and the house frame creaks. The wind had come on in gusts at sunset, full of dust and whirling leaves, but later it had got up into a gale. The fire had gone out and the house inside was black as a pit. He did not know what went on inside or out, but he knew that the gold was gone at daylight, and he knew that no living human creature had got into his house. The bar on his door held and the shutters were bolted. Whatever entered, entered through the keyhole or through the throat of the chimney that a cat would stick in.

Abner said nothing, but Randolph sat down to an official inquiry:

"You have been robbed, Betts," he said. "Somebody entered your house that night."

"Nobody entered it," replied the old man in his hoarse, half-whispered voice, "either on that night or any other night. The door wast fast, Squire."

"But the thief may have closed it behind him."

Betts shook his head. "He could not put up the bar behind him, and besides, I set it in a certain way. It was not moved. And the windows—I bolt them and turn the bolt at a certain angle. No human touched them."

It was not possible to believe that this man could be mistaken. One could see with what care he had set his little traps—the bar across the door precisely at a certain hidden line;

the bolts of the window shutters turned precisely to an angle that he alone knew. It was not likely that Randolph would suggest anything that this cautious old man had not already thought of.

"Then," continued Randolph, "the thief concealed himself in your house the day before the robbery and got out of it on the day after."

But again Betts shook his head, and his eyes ran over the house and to a candle on the mantelpiece.

"I look," he said, "every night before I go to bed."

And one could see the picture of this old, fearful man, looking through his house with the smoking tallow candle, peering into every nook and corner. Could a thief hide from him in this house that he knew inch by inch? One could not believe it. The creature took no chance; he had thought of every danger, this one among them, and every night he looked! He would know, then, the very cracks in the wall. He would have found a rat.

Then, it seemed to me, Randolph entered the only road there was out of this mystery.

"Your son knew about this money?"

"Yes," replied Betts, "'Lander knew about it. He used to say that a part of it was his because he had worked for it as much as I had. But I told him," and the old man's voice cheeped in a sort of laugh, "that he was mine."

"Where was your son Philander when the money disappeared?" said Randolph.

"Over the mountains," said Betts; "he had been gone a month." Then he paused and looked at Randolph. "It was not 'Lander. On that day he was in the school that Mr. Jefferson set up. I had a letter from the master asking for money. . . . I have the letter," and he got up to get it.

But Randolph waved his hand and sat back in his chair with the aspect of a brooding oracle.

It was then that my uncle spoke.

"Betts," he said, "how do you think the money went?"

The old man's voice got again into that big crude whisper.

"I don't know, Abner."

But my uncle pressed him.

"What do you think?"

Betts drew a little nearer to the table.

"Abner," he said, "there are a good many things going on around a man that he don't understand. We turn out a horse to pasture, and he comes in with hand-holts in his mane. . . . You have seen it?"

"Yes," replied my uncle.

And I had seen it, too, many a time, when the horses were brought up in the spring from pasture, their manes twisted and knotted into loops, as though to furnish a hand-holt to a rider.

"Well, Abner," continued the old man in his rustling whisper, "who rides the horse? You cannot untie or untwist those hand-holts—you must cut them out with shears—with iron. Is it true?"

"It is true," replied my uncle.

"And why, eh, Abner? Because those hand-holts were never knotted in by any human fingers! You know what the old folk say?"

"I know," answered my uncle. "Do you believe it, Betts?"

"Eh, Abner!" he croaked in the guttural whisper. "If there were no witches, why did our fathers hang up iron to keep them off? My grandmother saw one burned in the old country. She had ridden the king's horse, and greased her hands with shoemakers' wax so her fingers would not slip in the mane. . . . Shoemakers' wax! Mark you that, Abner!"

"Betts," cried Randolph, "you are a fool; there are no witches!"

"There was the Witch of Endor," replied my uncle. "Go on, Betts."

"By gad, sir!" roared Randolph, "if we are to try witches, I shall have to read up James the First. That Scotch king wrote a learned work on demonology. He advised the magistrates to search on the body of the witch for the seal of the devil; that would be a spot insensible to pain, and, James said, 'Prod for it with a needle.'"

But my uncle was serious.

"Go on, Betts," he said. "I do not believe that any man

entered your house and robbed you. But why do you think that a witch did?"

"Well, Abner," answered the old man, "who could have got in but such a creature? A thief cannot crawl through a key-hole, but there are things that can. My grandmother said that once in the old country a man awoke one night to see a gray wolf sitting by his fireside. He had an ax, as I have, and he fought the wolf with that and cut off its paw, whereupon it fled screaming through the keyhole. And the paw lying on the floor was a woman's hand!"

"Then, Betts," cried Randolph, "it's damned lucky that you didn't use your ax, if that is what one finds on the floor."

Randolph had spoken with pompous sarcasm, but at the words there came upon Abner's face a look of horror.

"It is," he said, "in God's name!"

Betts leaned forward in his chair.

"And what would have happened to me, Abner, do you think, if I had used my ax? Would I have died there with the ax in my hand?"

The look of horror remained upon my uncle's face.

"You would have wished for that when the light came; to die is sometimes to escape the pit."

"I would have fallen into hell, then?"

"Aye, Betts," replied my uncle, "straightway into hell!"

The old man rested his hands on the posts of the chair.

"The creatures behind the world are baleful creatures," he muttered in his big whisper.

Randolph got up at that.

"Dammel!" he said. "Are we in the time of Roger Williams, and is this Massachusetts, that witches ride and men are filched of their gold by magic and threatened with hell fire? What is this cursed foolery, Abner?"

"It is no foolery, Randolph," replied my uncle, "but the living truth."

"The truth!" cried Randolph. "Do you call it the truth that creatures, not human, able to enter through the keyhole and fly away, have Betts' gold, and if he had fought against this robbery with his ax he would have put himself in torment?"

Damme, man! In the name of common sense, do you call this the truth?"

"Randolph," replied Abner, and his voice was slow and deep, "it is every word the truth."

Randolph moved back the chair before him and sat down. He looked at my uncle curiously.

"Abner," he said, "you used to be a crag of common sense. The legends and theories of fools broke on you and went to pieces. Would you now testify to witches?"

"And if I did," replied my uncle, "I should have Saint Paul behind me."

"The fathers of the church fell into some errors," replied Randolph.

"The fathers of the law, then?" said Abner.

Randolph took his chin in his hand at that. "It is true," he said, "that Sir Matthew Hale held nothing to be so well established as the fact of witchcraft for three great reasons, which he gave in their order, as became the greatest judge in England: First, because it was asserted in the Scriptures; second, because all nations had made laws against it; and, third, because the human testimony in support of it was overwhelming. I believe that Sir Matthew had knowledge of some six thousand cases. . . . But Mr. Jefferson has lived since then, Abner, and this is Virginia."

"Nevertheless," replied my uncle, "after Mr. Jefferson, and in Virginia, this thing has happened."

Randolph swore a great oath.

"Then, by gad, sir, let us burn the old women in the villages until the creatures who carried Betts' treasure through the key-hole bring it back!"

Betts spoke then.

"They have brought some of it back!"

My uncle turned sharply in his chair.

"What do you mean, Betts?" he said.

"Why this, Abner," replied the old man, his voice descending into the cavernous whisper; "on three mornings I have found some of my gold pieces in the jar. And they came as they went, Abner, with every window fastened down and the bar across the door. And there is another thing about these

pieces that have come back—they are mine, for I know every piece—but they have been in the hands of the creatures that ride the horses in the pasture—they have been handled by witches!” He whispered the word with a fearful glance about him. “How do I know that? Wait, I will show you!”

He went over to his bed and got out a little box from beneath his cornhusk mattress—a worn, smoke-stained box with a sliding lid. He drew the lid off with his thumb and turned the contents out on the table.

“Now look,” he said; “look, there is wax on every piece! Shoemakers’ wax, mark you. . . . Eh, Abner! My mother said that—the creatures grease their hands with that so their fingers will not slip when they ride the barebacked horses in the night. They have carried this gold clutched in their hands, see, and the wax has come off!”

My uncle and Randolph leaned over the table. They examined the coins.

“By the Eternal!” cried Randolph. “It is wax! But were they clean before?”

“They were clean,” the old man answered. “The wax is from the creatures’ fingers. Did not my mother say it?”

My uncle sat back in his chair, but Betts strained forward and put his fearful query:

“What do you think, Abner; will all the gold come back?”

My uncle did not at once reply. He sat for some time silent, looking through the open door at the sunny meadowland and the far off hills. But finally he spoke like one who has worked out a problem and got the answer.

“It will not all come back,” he said.

“How much, then?” whispered Betts.

“What is left,” replied Abner, “when the toll is taken out.”

“You know where the gold is?”

“Yes.”

“And the creatures that have it, Abner,” Betts whispered, “they are not human?”

“They are not human!” replied my uncle.

Then he got up and began to walk about the house, but not to search for clues to this mysterious thing. He walked like one who examines something within himself—or something

beyond the eye—and old Betts followed him with his straining face. And Randolph sat in his chair with his arms folded and his chin against his stock, as a skeptic overwhelmed by proof might sit in a house of haunted voices. He was puzzled upon every hand. The thing was out of reason at every point, both in the loss and in the return of these coins upon the table, and my uncle's comments were below the soundings of all sense. The creatures who now had Betts' gold could enter through the keyhole! Betts would have gone into the pit if he had struck out with his ax! A moiety of this treasure would be taken out and the rest returned! And the coins testified to no human handling! The thing had no face nor aspect of events in nature. Mortal thieves enjoyed no such supernal powers. These were the attributes of the familiar spirit. Nor did the human robber return a per cent upon his gains!

I have said that my uncle walked about the floor. But he stopped now and looked down at the hard, miserly old man.

"Betts," he said, "this is a mysterious world. It is hedged about and steeped in mystery. Listen to me! The Patriarchs were directed to make an offering to the Lord of a portion of the increase in their herds. Why? Because the Lord had need of sheep and heifers? Surely not, for the whole earth and its increase were His. There was some other reason, Betts. I do not understand what it was, but I do understand that no man can use the earth and keep every tithe of the increase for himself. They did not try it, but you did!"

He paused and filled his big lungs.

"It was a disastrous experiment. . . . What will you do?"

"What must I do, Abner?" the old man whispered. "Make a sacrifice like the Patriarchs?"

"A sacrifice you must make, Betts," replied my uncle, "but not like the Patriarchs. What you received from the earth you must divide into three equal parts and keep one part for yourself."

"And to whom shall I give the other two parts, Abner?"

"To whom would you wish to give them, Betts, if you had the choice?"

The old man fingered about his mouth.

"Well," he said, "a man would give to those of his own household first—if he had to give."

"Then," said Abner, "from this day keep a third of your increase for yourself and give the other two-thirds to your son and your daughter."

"And the gold, Abner? Will it come back?"

"A third part will come back. Be content with that."

"And the creatures that have my gold? Will they harm me?"

"Betts," replied my uncle, "the creatures that have your gold on this day hidden in their house will labor for you as no slaves have ever labored—without word or whip. Do you promise?"

The fearful old man promised, and we went out into the sun.

The tall straight young girl was standing before the spring-house, kneading a dish of yellow butter and singing like a blackbird. My uncle strode down to her. We could not hear the thing he said, but the singing ceased when he began to talk and burst out in a fuller note when he had finished—a big, happy, joyous note that seemed to fill the meadow.

We waited for him before the stand of bees, and Randolph turned on him when he came.

"Abner," he said, "what is the answer to this damned riddle?"

"You gave it, Randolph," he replied—"‘Singing masons building roofs of gold.’" And he pointed to the bees. "When I saw that the cap on one of the gums had been moved I thought Betts' gold was there, and when I saw the wax on the coins I was certain."

"But," cried Randolph, "you spoke of creatures not human—creatures that could enter through the keyhole—creatures——"

"I spoke of the bees," replied my uncle.

"But you said Betts would have fallen into hell if he had struck out with his ax!"

"He would have killed his daughter," replied Abner. "Can you think of a more fearful hell? She took the gold and hid it in the bee cap. But she was honest with her father; whenever

she sent a sum of money to her brother she returned an equal number of gold pieces to old Betts' jar."

"Then," said Randolph, with a great oath, "there is no witch here with her familiar spirits?"

"Now that," replied my uncle, "will depend upon the imagery of language. There is here a subtle maiden and a stand of bees!"

The Riddle

I HAVE NEVER seen the snow fall as it fell on the night of the seventeenth of February. It had been a mild day with a soft, stagnant air. The sky seemed about to descend and enclose the earth, as though it were a thing which it had long pursued and had now got into a corner. All day it seemed thus to hover motionless above its quarry, and the earth to be apprehensive like a thing in fear. Animals were restless, and men, as they stood about and talked together, looked up at the sky.

We were in the county seat on that day. The grand jury was sitting, and Abner had been summoned to appear before it. It was the killing of old Christian Lance that the grand jury was inquiring into. He had been found one morning in his house, bound into a chair. The body sat straining forward, death on it, and terror in its face. There was no one in the house but old Christian, and it was noon before the neighbors found him. The tragedy had brought the grand jury together, and had filled the hills with talk, for it left a mystery unsolved.

This mystery that Christian sealed up in his death was one that no man could get a hint at while he was living—what had the old man done with his money? He grazed a few cattle and got a handsome profit. He spent next to nothing; he gave nothing to any one, and he did not put his money out to interest. It was known that he would take only gold in payment for his cattle. He made no secret of that. The natural inference was that he buried his coin in some spot about his garden, but idle persons had watched his house for whole nights after he had sold his cattle, and had never seen him come out with a spade. And young bloods, more curious, I think, than criminal, had gone into his house when he was absent, and searched it more than once. There was no corner that they had not

looked into, and no floor board that they had not lifted, nor any loose stone about the hearth that they had not felt under.

Once, in conference on this mystery, somebody had suggested that the knobs on the andirons and the handles on the old high-boy were gold, having gotten the idea from some tale. And a little later, when the old man returned one evening from the grist-mill, he found that one of these knobs on the andirons had been broken off. But, as the thief never came back for the other, it was pretty certain that this fantastic notion was not the key to Christian's secret.

It was after one of these mischievous searchings that he put up his Delphic notice when he went away—a leaf from a day-book, scrawled in pencil, and pinned to the mantelpiece: “Why don't you look in the cow?”

The idle gossips puzzled over that. What did it mean? Was the thing a sort of taunt? And did the old man mean that since these persons had looked into every nook and corner of his house, they ought also to have looked into the red mouth of the cow? Or did he mean that his money was invested in cattle and there was the place to look? Or was the thing a cryptic sentence—like that of some ancient oracle—in which the secret to his hoarded gold was hidden?

At any rate it was certain that old Christian was not afraid to go away and leave his door open, and the secret to guard itself. And he was justified in that confidence. The mischievous gave over their inquiries, and the mystery became a sort of legend.

With the eyes of the curious thus on him, and that mystery for background, it was little wonder that his tragic death fired the country.

I have said there was a horror about the dead man's face as he sat straining in the chair. And the thing was in truth a horror! But that word does not tell the story. The eyes, the muscles of his jaw, the very flesh upon his bones seemed to strain with some deadly resolution, as though the indomitable spirit of the man, by sheer determination, would force the body to do its will, even after death was on it. And here there was a curious thing. It was not about the house, where his treasure might have been concealed, that the dead man

strained, but toward the door, as though he would follow after some one who had gone out there.

The neighbors cut him from the chair, straightened out his limbs, and got him buried. But his features, set in that deadly resolution, they could not straighten out. Neither the placidity of death, nor the fingers of those who prepared the man for burial, could relax the muscles or get down his eyelids. He lay in the coffin with that hideous resolution on his face, and he went into the earth with it.

When the man was found, Randolph sent for Abner, and the two of them looked through the house. Nothing had been disturbed. There was a kettle on the crane, and a crock beside the hearth. The ears of seed corn hung from the rafters, trussed up by their shucks; the bean pods together in a cluster; the cakes of tallow sat on a shelf above the mantel; the festoons of dried apples and the bunches of seasoned herbs hung against the chimney. The bed and all the furniture about the house was in its order.

When they had finished with that work they did not know who it was that had killed old Christian. Abner did not talk, but he said that much, and the Justice of the Peace told all he knew to every casual visitor. True, it was nothing more than the county knew already, but his talk annoyed Abner.

"Randolph's a leaky pitcher," he said. And I think it was this comment that inspired the notion that Abner knew something that he had not told the Justice.

At any rate he was a long time before the grand jury on this February day. The grand jury sat behind closed doors. They were stern, silent men, and nothing crept out through the keyhole. But after the witnesses were heard, the impression got about that the grand jury did not know who had killed old Christian, and this conclusion was presently verified when they came in before the judge. They had no indictment to find. And when the judge inquired if they knew of anything that would justify the prosecuting attorney in taking any further action on behalf of the state, the foreman shook his head.

Night was descending when we left the county-seat. Abner sat in his saddle like a man of bronze, his face stern, as it al-

ways was when he was silent, and I rode beside him. I wish I could get my Uncle Abner before your eye. He was one of those austere, deeply religious men who might have followed Cromwell, with a big iron frame, a grizzled beard and features forged out by a smith. His god was the god of the Tishbite, who numbered his followers by the companies who drew the sword. The land had need of men like Abner. The government of Virginia was over the Alleghenies, and this great, fertile cattle country, hemmed in by the far-off mountains like a wall of the world, had its own peace to keep. And it was these iron men who kept it. The fathers had got this land in grants from the King of England; they had held it against the savage and finally against the King himself . . . And the sons were like them.

The horses were nervous; they flung their heads about, and rattled the bit rings and traveled together like men apprehensive of some danger to be overtaken. That deadly stillness of the day remained, but the snow was now beginning to appear. It fell like no other snow that I have ever seen—not a gust of specks or a shower of tiny flakes, but now and then, out of the dirty putty-colored sky, a flake as big as a man's thumb-nail winged down and lighted on the earth like some living creature. And it clung to the thing that it lighted on as though out of the heavens it had selected that thing to destroy. And, while it clung, there came another of these soft white creatures to its aid, and settled beside it, and another and another, until the bare stem of the ragweed, or the brown leaf of the beech tree snapped under the weight of these clinging bodies.

It is a marvel how quickly this snow covered up the world, and how swiftly and silently it descended. The trees and fences were grotesque and misshapen with it. The landscape changed and was blotted out. Night was on us, and always the invading swarm of flakes increased until they seemed to crowd one another in the stagnant air.

Presently Abner stopped and looked up at the sky, but he did not speak and we went on. But now the very road began to be clogged with this wet snow; great limbs broke at the tree trunks under the weight of it; the horses began to flounder,

and at last Abner stopped. It seemed to be at a sort of cross-road in a forest, but I was lost. The snow had covered every landmark that I knew. We had been traveling for an hour in a country as unfamiliar as the Tartar Steppes.

Abner turned out of the road into the forest. My horse followed. We came presently into the open, and stopped under the loom of a house. It was a great barn of hewn logs, but unused and empty. The door stood open on its broken hinges. We got down, took the horses in, removed the saddles, and filled the mangers with some old hay from the loft. I had no idea where we were. We could not go on, and I thought we would be forced to pass the night here. But this was not Abner's plan.

"Let us try to find the house, Martin," he said, "and build a fire."

We set out from the stable. Abner broke a trail through the deep snow, and I followed at his heels. He must have had some sense of direction, for we could not see. We seemed an hour laboring in that snow, but it could only have been a few minutes at the furthest. Presently we came upon broad steps, and under the big columns of a portico. And I knew the place for an old abandoned manor house, set in a corner of worn-out fields, in the edge of the forest, where the river bowed in under sheer banks a dozen fathoms down. The estate was grown up with weeds, and the house falling to decay. But now, when we came into the portico, a haze of light was shining through the fan-shaped glass over the door. It was this light that disturbed Abner. He stopped and stood there in the shelter of the columns, like a man in some perplexity.

"Now, who could that be?" he said, not to me, but to himself.

And he remained for some time, watching the blur of light, and listening for a sound. But there was no sound. The house had been abandoned. The windows were nailed up. Finally he went over to the ancient door and knocked. For answer there was the heavy report of a weapon, and a white splinter leaped out of a panel above his head. He sprang aside, and the weapon bellowed again, and I saw another splinter. And then I saw a thing that I had not noticed, that the door and the boards over

the windows were riddled with these bullet holes. Abner shouted out his name and called on the man within to stop shooting and open the door.

For some time there was silence; then, finally the door did open, and a man stood there with a candle in his hand. He was a little old man with a stub of wiry beard, red grizzled hair, keen eyes like a crumb of glass, and a body knotted and tawny like a stunted oak tree. He wore a sort of cap with a broad fur collar fastened with big brass wolf-head clasps. And I knew him. He was the old country doctor, Storm, who had come into the hills, from God knows where. He lived not far away, and as a child, I feared him. I feared the flappings of his cape on some windy ridge, for he walked the country in his practice, and only rode when the distances were great. No one knew his history, and about him the Negroes had conjured up every sort of fancy. These notions took a sort of form. Storm was a rival of the Devil and jousted with him for the lives of men and beasts. He would work on a horse, snapping his jaws and muttering his strange oaths, as long and as patiently as upon the body of a man. And surely, if one stood and watched him, one would presently believe that Storm contended with something for its prey. I can see him now, standing in the door with the candle held high up so he could peer into the darkness.

He cried out when he saw Abner.

"Come in," he said, "by the Eternal, you are welcome!"

"Storm!" said Abner, "you in this house!"

"And why not?" replied the man. "I walk and am overtaken by a snow; and you ride and do not escape it."

He laughed, showing his twisted, yellow teeth, and turned about in the doorway, and we followed him into the house. There was a fire burning on the hearth and another candle guttering on the table. It was a hall that the door led into—the conventional hall of the great old Southern manor house, wide mahogany doors on either side stood closed in their white frames, a white stairway going up to a broad landing, and a huge fireplace with brass andirons. The place was warm, but musty. It had long been stripped and gutted. It was hung with cobwebs and powdered down with dust. There was a small

portmanteau on the table, such as one's father used to carry, of black leather with little flaps and buckles. And beside it a blue iron stone jug and a dirty tumbler.

The man set down the candle and indicated the jug and the fireplace with a queer, ironical gesture.

"I offer you the hospitality of the cup and the hearth, Abner," he said.

"We will take the hearth, Storm," replied Abner, "if you please."

And we went over to the fireplace, took off our great coats, beat out the wet snow, and sat down on the old mahogany settle by the andirons.

"Every man to the desire of his heart and the custom of his life," said Storm.

He took up the jug, turned it on end, and drained its contents into the glass. There was only a little of the liquor left. It was brewed from apples, raw and fiery, and the odor of it filled the place. Then he held up the glass, watching the fire-light play in the white-blue liquor.

"You fill the mind with phantoms," he said, turning the glass about as though it held some curious drug. "We swallow you and see things that are not, and dead men from their graves."

He toyed with the glass, put it on the table, and sat down.

"Abner," he said, "I know the body of a man down to the fiber of his bones; but the mind—it is a land of mystery. We dare not trust it." He paused and rapped the table with his callous fingers.

"Against another we may be secure, but against himself what one of us is safe? A man may have no fear of your Hebrew God, Abner, or your Assyrian Devil, and yet, his own mind may turn against him and fill him full of terror. . . . A man may kill his enemy in secret and hide him, and return to his house secure—and find the dead man sitting in his chair with the wet blood on him. And with all his philosophies he cannot eject that phantom from its seat. He will say this thing does not exist. But what avails the word when the thing is there!"

He got on his feet and leaned over the table with his crooked fingers out before him.

I was afraid and I drew closer to my uncle. This strange old man, straining over the table, peering into the shadows, held me with a gripping fascination. His wiry, faded red hair seemed to rise on his scalp, and I looked to see some horror in its grave clothes appear before him.

Abner turned his stern face upon him. It was some time before he spoke.

"Storm," he said, "what do you fear?"

"Fear!" cried the old man, his voice rising in a sharp staccato; and he made a gesture outward with his hand.

"You fear your God, Abner, and I fear myself!"

But there was something in Abner's voice and in this query launched at him that changed the man as by some sorcery. He sat down, fingered the glass of liquor, and looked at Abner closely. He did not speak for some time. He appeared to be turning some problem slowly in his mind. There was a lot of mystery here to clear up. We had discovered him by chance, and surely he had received us in the strangest manner. His explanation could not be true that he had come into the house before us on this night, for the house was warm, and it could not have been heated in that time. What was the creature's secret? Why was he here, and who besieged him. These were things which he must fear to have known, and yet, he was glad to see us, glad to find us there in the snow, instead of another whom he feared to find there. And yet, we disturbed him, and he was uncertain what to do. He sat beyond the table, and I could see his eyes run over us, and wander off about the hall and return and glance at the black portmanteau.

And while he hung there between his plans, Abner spoke.

"Storm," he said, "what does all this mean?"

The old man looked about him swiftly, furtively, I thought; then he spoke in a voice so low that we could hardly hear him.

"Let me put it this way, Abner," he said: "One comes here, as you come; he is met as you are met; well, what happens from all this? . . . A suspicion enters the visitor's mind. There is peril to the host in that, and he is put to an alternative. He must explain or he must shoot the guest. . . . Well, he chooses to make his explanation first, and if that fail, there is the other!

“‘And,’ he says, ‘you have done me a service to come in; I am glad to see you.’ And you say, ‘What do you fear?’ He answers, ‘Robbers.’ You say, ‘What have you in this house to lose?’ And he tells you this:

“Michael Dale owned this house. He was rich. When he was dying he sat here by this hearth, tapping the bricks with his cane, and peering at his worthless son. You remember that son, Abner; he looked like the Jupiter of Elis before the Devil got him. ‘Wellington,’ he said, ‘I am leaving you a treasure here.’ He had been speaking of this estate, and one thought he meant the lands, and so gave the thing no notice. But later one remembered that expression and began to think it over. One recalled where it was that Michael Dale sat and the tapping of his stick. Well, when one is going down, any straw is worth the clutching. One slips into this house and looks.”

He indicated the brick hearth with a gesture.

“No, it is not there now. The gold is in that portmanteau.”

He arose, opened the bag, and fumbled in it. Then he came to us with some pieces in his hand.

Abner took the gold and examined it carefully by the fire-light. They were old pieces, and he rubbed them between his fingers and scraped something from their faces with his thumb-nail. Then he handed them back, and Storm cast them into the portmanteau and buckled it together. Then he sat down and drew the stone jug over beside him.

“Now, Abner,” he said, “there is this evil about a treasure. It fills one full of fear. You must stand guard over it, and the thing gets on your nerves. The wind in the chimney is a voice, and every noise a footstep. At first one goes about with the weapon in his hand, and then, when he can bear it no more, he shoots at every sound.”

Abner did not move, and I listened to the man as to a tale of Bagdad. Every mystery was now cleared up—his presence in this house, his fear, the bullet holes, and why he was glad to see us, and yet disturbed that we had come. And I saw what he had been turning in his mind—whether he should trust us with the truth or leave us to our own conclusions. I understood and verified in myself every detail of this story. I should have acted as he did at every step, and I could realize

this fear, and how, as the thing possessed him, one might come at last to shoot up the shadows. I looked at the man with a sort of wonder.

Abner had been stroking his bronze face with his great sinewy hand, and now he spoke.

"Storm," he said, "Michael Dale's riddle is not the only one that has been read." And he told of Christian Lance's death, and the Delphic sentence that had doubtless caused it. "You knew old Christian, Storm, and his curious life?"

"I did," replied Storm, "and I knew the man who carried off the knob of the andiron. But how do you say that any man read his riddle, Abner, and how do you know that there was any riddle in it? I took the thing to be an idle taunt."

"And so did Randolph," said Abner, "but you were both wrong. The secret was in that scrawled sentence, and some one guessed it."

"How do you know that, Abner?" said Storm.

Abner did not reply directly to the point.

"Old Christian loved money," he went on. "He would have died before he told where it was hidden. And his straining toward the door, as though in death he would follow one who had gone out there, meant that his secret had been divined, and that his gold had gone that way."

"You ride to a conclusion on straws, Abner," said Storm, "if that is all the proof you have."

"Well," replied Abner, "I have also a theory."

"And what is your theory?" said Storm.

"It is this," continued Abner; "when old Christian wrote, 'Why don't you look in the cow,' he meant a certain thing. There was a row of tallow cakes on a shelf. My theory is that each year when he got the gold from his cattle, he molded it into one of these tallow cakes, turned it out of the crock, and put it on the shelf. And there, in the heart of these tallow cakes, was the old man's treasure!"

"But you tell me that the cakes were there on this shelf when you found old Christian," said Storm.

"They were," replied Abner.

"Every one of them," said Storm.

"Every one of them," answered Abner.

"Had any one of them been cut or broken?"

"Not one of them; they were smooth and perfect."

"Then your first conclusion goes to pieces, Abner. No man carried Christian's money through the door; it is there on the shelf."

"No," said Abner, "it is not there. The man who killed old Christian Lance got the gold out of those cakes of tallow."

"And, now, Abner," cried the man, "the bottom of your theory falls. How could one get the gold out of these cakes, and leave them perfect?"

"I will tell you that," replied Abner. "There was a kettle on the crane and a crock beside the hearth, and every cake of tallow on the shelf was white . . . They had been remolded! Randolph did not see that, but I did."

Storm got on his feet.

"Then you do not believe this explanation, Abner—that the gold comes from the hearth?"

"I do not," replied Abner, and his voice was deep and level. "There is tallow on these coins!"

I saw Abner glance at the iron poker and watch Storm's hand.

But the old man did not draw his weapon. He laughed noiselessly, twisting his crooked mouth.

"You are right, Abner," he said, "it is Christian's gold, and this tale a lie. But you are wrong in your conclusion. Lance was not killed by a little man like I am; he was killed by a big man like you!"

He paused and leaned over, resting his hands on the table.

"The man who killed him did not guess that riddle, Abner. . . . Put the evidences together. . . . Lance was tied into his chair before the assassin killed him. Why? That was to threaten him with death unless he told where his gold was hidden. . . . Well, Lance would not tell that, but the assassin found it out by chance. He stooped to put the poker into the fire to heat it, and torture Christian. The cakes of tallow were on a hanging shelf against the white-washed chimney; as the assassin arose, he struck this shelf with his shoulder, and one

of the tallow cakes fell and burst on the hearth. Then he killed Christian with a blow of the heated poker. I know that because the hair about the wound was scorched!

"You saw a good deal in that house, Abner, but did you see a crease in the chimney where the shelf smote it, and the mark of a man's shoulder on the whitewash? And that shoulder, Abner," he raised his hand above his head, "it was as high as yours!"

There was silence.

And as the two men looked thus at each other, there was a sound as of something padding about the house outside. For a moment I did not understand these sounds, then I realized that the wind was rising, and clumps of snow falling from the trees. But to another in that house these sounds had no such explanation.

Then a thing happened. One of the mahogany doors entering the hall leaped back, and a man stood there with a pistol in his hand. And in all my life I have never seen a creature like him! There was everything fine and distinguished in his face, but the face was a ruin. It was a loathsome and hideous ruin. Made for the occupancy of a god, the man's body was the dwelling of a devil. I do not mean a clean and vicious devil, but one low and bestial, that wallowed and gorged itself with sins. And there was another thing in that face that to understand, one must have seen it. There was terror, but no fear! It was as though the man advanced against a thing that filled him full of horror, but he advanced with courage. He had a spirit in him that saw and knew the aspect and elements of danger, but it could not be stampeded into flight.

I heard Abner say, "Dale!" like one who pronounces the name of some extraordinary thing. And I heard Storm say, "Mon dieu! With a teaspoonful of laudanum in him, he walks!"

The creature did not see us; he was listening to the sounds outside, and he started for the door.

"You there," he bellowed, "again! . . . Damn you! . . . Well, I'll get you this time. . . . I'll hunt you to hell!" . . . And his drunken voice rumbled off into obscenities and oaths.

He flung the door open and went out. His weapon thundered, and by it and the drunken shouting, we could track him. He seemed to move north, as though lured that way. We stood and listened.

"He goes toward the river," said Abner. "It is God's will."

Then far off there was a last report of the weapon and a great bellowing cry that shuddered through the forest.

That night over the fire, Storm told us how he had come in from the snow and found Dale drunk and fighting the ghost of Christian Lance; how he listened to his story, and slipped the drug into his glass, and how he got him hidden, when we came, on the promise to keep his secret; and how he had fenced with Abner, seeing that Abner suspected him.

But it was the failure of his drug that vexed him.

"It would put a brigadier and his horse to sleep—that much, if it were pure. I shall take ten drops to-morrow night and see."

The Straw Man

IT WAS A DAY of early June in Virginia. The afternoon sun lay warm on the courthouse with its great plaster pillars; on the tavern with its two-story porch; on the stretches of green fields beyond and the low wooded hill, rimmed by the far-off mountains like a wall of the world.

It was the first day of the circuit court, which all the country attended. And on this afternoon, two men crossed the one thoroughfare that lay through the county seat, and went up the wide stone steps into the courthouse.

The two men were in striking contrast. One, short of stature and beginning to take on the rotundity of age, was dressed with elaborate care, his great black stock propping up his chin, his linen and the cloth of his coat immaculate. He wore a huge carved ring and a bunch of seals attached to his watch-fob. The other was a big, broad-shouldered, deep-chested Saxon, with all those marked characteristics of a race living out of doors and hardened by wind and sun. His powerful frame carried no ounce of surplus weight. It was the frame of the empire builder on the frontier of the empire. The face reminded one of Cromwell, the craggy features in repose seemed molded over iron, but the fine gray eyes had a calm serenity, like remote spaces in the summer sky. The man's clothes were plain and somber. And he gave one the impression of things big and vast.

As the two entered between the plaster pillars, a tall old man came out from the county clerk's office. But for his face, he might have been one of a thousand Englishmen in Virginia. There was nothing in the big, spare figure or the cranial lines of the man to mark.

But the face seized you. In it was an unfathomable disgust with life, joined, one would say, with a cruel courage. The

hard, bony jaw protruded; bitter lines descended along the planes of the face, and the eyes circled by red rims were expressionless and staring, as though, by some abominable negligence of nature, they were lidless.

The two approached, and the one so elaborately dressed spoke to the old man.

"How do you do, Northcote Moore?" he said. "You know Abner?"

The old man stopped instantly and stood very still. He moved the stick in his hand a trifle before him. Then he spoke in a high-pitched, irascible voice.

"Abner, eh! Well, what the devil is Abner here for?"

The little pompous man clenched his fingers in his yellow gloves, but his voice showed no annoyance.

"I asked him to have a look at Eastwood Court."

"Damn the justice of the peace of every county," cried the old man, "and you included, Randolph! You never make an end of anything."

He gave no attention to Abner, who remained unembarrassed, regarding the impolite old man as one regards some strange, new, and particularly offensive beast.

"Chuck the whole business, Randolph, that's what I say," the irascible old man continued, "and forget about it. Who the devil cares? A drooling old paralytic is snuffed out. Well, he ought to have gone five and twenty years ago! He couldn't manage his estate and he kept me out. I was like to hang about until I rotted, while the creature played at Patience, propped up against the table and the wall. A nigger, on a search for shillings, knocks him on the head. Shall I hunt the nigger down and hang him? Damme! I would rather get him a patent of state lands!"

The face of Randolph was a study in expression.

"But, sir," he said, "there are some things about this affair that are peculiar—I may say extraordinarily peculiar."

Again the old man stood still. When he spoke his voice was in a lower note.

"And so," he said, "you have nosed out a new clew and got Abner over, and we are to have another inquisition."

He reflected, moving his stick idly before him. Then he went on in a petulant, persuasive tone.

"Why can't you let sleeping dogs lie? The country is beginning to forget this affair, and you set about to stir it up. Shall I always have the thing clanking at my heels like a ball and chain?"

Then he rang the paved court with the ferrule of his stick.

"Damme, man!" he cried. "Has Virginia no mysteries, that you yap forever on old scents at Eastwood? What does it matter who did this thing? It was a public service. Virginia needs a few men on her lands with a bit of courage. This state is rotten with old timber. In youth, Duncan Moore was a fool. In age, he was better dead. Let there be an end to this, Randolph."

And he turned about and went back into the county clerk's office.

Randolph was a justice of the peace in Virginia. He looked a moment after the departing figure; then he spoke to his companion.

"He is here to have the lands of Duncan Moore transferred on the assessor's book to his own name. He takes the estate under the Life and Lives statute of Virginia, that the legislature got up to soften the rigor of Mr. Jefferson's Statute of Descents. Under it, this estate with its great English manor house was devised by the original ancestor to Duncan Moore for his life, and after him to Northcote Moore for his life, and at his death to Esdale Moore. It could have run twenty-one years farther if the scrivener had known the statute. Mr. Jefferson did not entirely decapitate the law of entail."

He paused and lifted his finger with a curious gesture.

"It is a queer family—I think the very queerest in Virginia. There is something defective about every one of them. Duncan Moore, the decedent, had no children. His two brothers died epileptics. This man, the son of the elder brother, is blind. And the son of the junior, Mr. Esdale Moore, the attorney-at-law——"

The Justice of the Peace was interrupted. A little dapper man, sunburned and bareheaded, dressed like a tailor's print,

but with the smart, aggressive air of a well-bred colonial Englishman, pushed through the crowd and clapped the Justice on the shoulder.

"What luck, Randolph?" he cried. "I am sure Abner has run the assassin to cover." And he bobbed his head to Abner like one whose profession permits a certain familiarity. "Come along to the tavern; 'I would listen to your wondrous tales,' as Homer says it."

He led the way, calling out to a member of the bar, hailing an acquaintance, and hurling banter about him in the bluff, hearty fashion which he imagined to be the correct manner of a man of the people who is getting on. He was in the strength and vigor of his race at forty.

"Beastly dull, Randolph," he rattled; "nothing exciting since the dawn expect old Baron-Vitch's endless suit in chancery. But one must sit tight, rain or shine. The people must know where to find a lawyer when they want him."

He swung along with a big military stride.

"The life of a lawyer is far from jolly. I should like to cut it, Randolph, if I had a good shooting and a bit of trout water. Alas, I am poor!" And he made a dramatic gesture.

One felt that under this froth the man was calling out the truth. For all his hearty interest in affairs, the law was merely a sort of game. It was nothing real. He played to win, and he had chosen his profession with care and after long reflection, as a breeder chooses a colt for the Derby, or as an English family of influence selects a crack regiment for the heir at Oxford. He cared not one penny what the laws were or the great policies of Virginia. But he did care, with an inbred and abiding interest, about the value of a partridge shooting, or the damming of a trout stream by the grist mills. These things were the realities of life, and not the actions at law or the suits in chancery.

"How does one get a fortune nowadays, Abner?" he called back across his shoulder, "for I need one like the devil. Marriage or crime, eh? Crime requires a certain courage, and they say out in the open that lawyers are decadent. With you and Randolph on the lookout, I should be afraid to go in for crime!"

He clapped a passing giant on the back, called him Harrison, accused him of having an eye on Congress, and went on across his shoulder to Abner:

"Marriage, then? Do you know a convenient orphan with a golden goose? Pleasure and a certain gain would be idyllic! The simplest men understand that. Do not the writers in Paris tell us that the French peasant on his marriage night, while embracing his bride with one arm, extends the other in order to feel the sack that contains her dowry?"

They were now on the upper floor of the tavern porch. Mr. Esdale Moore sent a Negro for a dish of tea, after the English fashion.

Then he got a table at the end of the porch, somewhat apart, and the three men sat down.

"And now, Randolph," he said, "what did you find in Eastwood?"

"I am afraid," replied the Justice of the Peace, "that we found little new there. The evidence remains, with trifling additions, what it was; but Abner has arrived at some interesting opinions upon this evidence."

"I am sure Abner can clap his hand on the assassin," said the attorney. "Come, sir, let me fill your cup, and while I stand on one foot, as St. Augustine used to say, tell me who ejected my uncle, the venerable Duncan Moore, out of life."

The Negro servant had returned with a great silver pot, and a tray of cups with queer kneeling purple cows on them.

Abner held out his cup.

"Sir," he said, "one must be very certain, to answer that question." His voice was deep and level, like some balanced element in nature.

He waited while the man filled the cup; then he replaced it on the table.

"And, sir," he continued slowly, "I am not yet precisely certain "

He slipped a lump of sugar slowly into the cup.

"It is the Ruler of Events who knows, sir; we can only conjecture. We cannot see the truth naked before us as He does; we must grope for it from one indication to another until we find it."

"But, reason, Abner," interrupted the lawyer, bustling in his chair; "we have that, and God has nothing better!"

"Sir," replied Abner, "I cannot think of God depending on a thing so crude as reason. If one reflects upon it, I think one will immediately see that reason is a quality exclusively peculiar to the human mind. It is a thing that God could never, by any chance, require. Reason is the method by which those who do not know the truth, step by step, finally discover it."

He paused and looked out across the table at the far-off mountains.

"And so, sir, God knows who in Virginia has a red hand from this work at Eastwood Court, without assembling the evidence and laboring to determine whither these signboards point. But Randolph and I are like children with a puzzle. We must get all the pieces first, and then sit down and laboriously fit them up."

He looked down into his cup, his face in repose and reflective.

"Ah, sir," he went on, "if one could be certain that one had always every piece, there would no longer remain such a thing as a human mystery. Every event dovetails into every other event that precedes and follows. With the pieces complete, the truth could never elude us. But, alas, sir, human intelligence is feeble and easily deludes itself, and the relations and ramifications of events are vast and intricate."

"Then, sir," said Mr. Esdale Moore, "you do not believe that the criminal can create a series of false evidences that will be at all points consistent with the truth."

"No man can do it," replied Abner. "For to do that, one must know everything that goes before and everything that follows the event which one is attempting to falsify. And this omniscience only the intelligence of God can compass. It is impossible for the human mind to manufacture a false consistency of events except to a very limited extent."

"Then, gentlemen," cried the lawyer, "you can make me no excuse for leaving this affair a mystery."

"Yes," replied my uncle, "we could make you an excuse—a valid and sound excuse: the excuse of incompetency."

Mr. Esdale Moore laughed in his big, hearty voice.

"With your reputation, Abner, and that of Squire Randolph in Virginia, I should refuse to receive it."

"Alas," continued Abner, "we are no better than other men. A certain experience, some knowledge of the habits of criminals, and a little skill in observation are the only advantages we have. If one were born among us with, let us say, a double equipment of skull space, no criminal would ever escape him."

"He would laugh at us, Abner," said the Justice.

"He would never cease to laugh," returned my uncle, "but he would laugh the loudest at the bungling criminal. To him, the most cunning crime would be a botch; fabricated events would be conspicuous patch-work, and he would see the identity of the criminal agent in a thousand evidences."

He hesitated a moment; then he added:

"Fortunately for human society, the inconsistency of false evidence is usually so glaring that any one of us is able to see it."

"As in Lord William Russell's case," said the Justice, "where the valet, having killed his master in such a manner as to create the aspect of suicide, inadvertently carried away the knife with which his victim was supposed to have cut his own throat."

"Precisely," said Abner. "And there is, I think, in every case something equally inconsistent, if we only look close enough to find it."

He turned to Mr. Esdale Moore.

"With a little observation, sir, to ascertain the evidence, and a little common sense to interpret its intent, Randolph and I manage to get on."

The lawyer put a leading question.

"What glaring inconsistency did you find at Eastwood?" he said.

Abner looked at Randolph, as though for permission to go on. The Justice nodded.

"Why, this thing, sir," he answered, "that a secretary that was not locked should be broken open."

"But, Abner," said the lawyer, "who, but myself, knew that this secretary was not locked? It was the custom to lock it,

although it contained nothing but my uncle's playing cards. As I told Randolph, on the day of my uncle's death I put the key down among the litter of papers inside the secretary, after I had opened it, and could not find it again, so I merely closed the lid. But I alone knew this. Everybody else would imagine the secretary to be locked as usual."

"Not everybody," continued my uncle. "Reflect a moment: To believe the secretary locked on this night, one must have known that it was locked on every preceding night. To believe that it was locked on this night because the lid was closed, one must have known that it was always locked on every preceding night when the lid was closed. And further, sir, one must have known this custom so well—one must have been so certain of it—that one knew it was not worth while to attempt to open the secretary by pulling down the lid on the chance that it might not be locked, and so, broke it open at once.

"Now, sir," he went on, "does this not exclude the theory that Duncan Moore was killed by a common burglar who entered the house for the purpose of committing a robbery? Such a criminal agent could not have known this custom. He might have believed the secretary to be locked, or imagined it to be, but he could not have known it conclusively. He could not have been so certain that he would fail to lay hold of the lid to make sure. One must assume the lowest criminal will act with some degree of intelligence."

"By Jove!" cried the attorney, striking the table, "I had a feeling that my uncle was not killed by a common thief! I thought the authorities were not at the bottom of this thing, and that is why I kept at Randolph, why I urged him to get you out to Eastwood Court."

"Sir," replied Abner, "I am obliged to you for the compliment. But your feeling was justified, and your persistence in this case will, I think, be rewarded.

"Nevertheless, sir, if you will pardon the digression, permit me to say that your remark interests me profoundly. Whence, I wonder, came this feeling that caused you to reject the obvious explanation and to urge a further and more elaborate inquiry?"

"Now, Abner," returned Mr. Esdale Moore, "I cannot answer that question. The thing was a kind of presentiment. I had a sort of feeling, as we express it. I cannot say more than that."

"I have had occasion," continued Abner, "to examine the theory of presentiments, and I find that we are forced to one of two conclusions: Either they are of an origin exterior to the individual, of which we have no reliable proof, or they are founded upon some knowledge of which the correlation in the mind is, for the moment, obscure. That is to say, a feeling, presentiment, or premonition, may be a sort of shadow thrown by an unformed conclusion."

"An unconscious or subconscious mental process produces an impression. We take this impression to be from behind the stars, when, in fact, it merely indicates the rational conclusion at which we would have arrived if we had made a strong, conscious effort to understand the enigma before us."

He drank a little tea and put the cup back gently on the table.

"Perhaps, sir, if you had gone forward with the mental processes that produced your premonition, you would have worked out the solution of this mystery. Why, I wonder, did your deductions remain subconscious?"

"That is a question in mental science," replied the lawyer.

"Is not all science mental?" continued my uncle. "Do not men take their facts in a bag to the philosopher that he may put them together? Let us reflect a moment, sir: Are not the primitive emotions—as, for example, fear—in their initial stages always subconscious, or, as we say, instinctive? Thus, a thousand times in the day do not our bodies draw back from danger of which we are wholly unconscious? We do not go forward into these perils, and we pass on with no realization of their existence. Can we doubt, sir, that the mind also instinctively perceives danger at the end of certain mental processes and does not go forward upon them?"

The lawyer regarded my uncle in a sort of wonder.

"Abner," he said, "you forget my activities in this affair. It is I who have kept at Randolph. What instinctive fear, then, could have mentally restrained me?"

"Why, sir," replied Abner, "the same fear that instinctively restrained Randolph and myself."

Mr. Esdale Moore looked my uncle in the face.

"What fear?" he said.

"The fear," continued Abner, "of what these deductions lead to."

Abner moved his chair a little nearer to the table and went on in a lower voice.

"Now, sir, if we exclude the untenable hypothesis that this crime was committed by an unknown thief, from the motive of robbery, what explanation remains? Let us see: This secretary could have been broken open only by some one who knew that it was the custom to keep it locked. Who was certain of that custom? Obviously, sir, only those in the household of the aged Duncan Moore."

The face of the lawyer showed a profound interest. He leaned over, put his right elbow on the table, rested his chin in the trough of the thumb and finger, and with his other hand, took a box of tobacco cigarettes from his pocket and began to break it open. It was one of the elegancies of that day.

Abner went on, "Was it a servant at Eastwood Court?"

He paused, and Randolph interrupted.

"On the night of this tragedy," said the Justice of the Peace, "all the Negroes in the household attended a servants' ball on a neighboring estate. They went in a body and returned in a body. The aged Duncan Moore was alive when they left the house, and dead when they returned."

"But, Randolph," Abner went on, "independent of this chance event, conclusive in itself—which I feel is an accident to which we are hardly entitled—do not our inferences legitimately indicate a criminal agent other than a servant at Eastwood Court?"

"Sane men do not commit violent crimes without a motive. There was no motive to move any servant except that of gain, and there was no gain to be derived from the death of the aged Duncan Moore, except that to be got from rifling his secretary. But the one who knew so much about this secretary

that he was certain it was locked, would also have known enough about it to know that it contained nothing of value."

He hesitated and moved the handle of his cup.

"Now, sir," he added, "two persons remain."

The lawyer, fingering the box of cigarettes, broke it open and presented them to my uncle and Randolph. He lighted one, and over the table looked Abner in the face.

"You mean Northcote Moore and myself," he said in a firm, even voice. "Well, sir, which one was it?"

My uncle remained undisturbed.

"Sir," he said, "there was at least a pretense of consistency in the work of the one who manufactured the evidences of a burglar. There was a window open in the north wing at the end of the long, many-cornered passage that leads through Eastwood Court to the room in the south wing where the aged Duncan Moore was killed. Now some one had gone along that passage, as you pointed out to Randolph when Eastwood Court was first inspected, because there were finger-prints on the walls at the turns and angles. These finger-prints were marked in the dust on the walls of the passage on the east side, but on the west side, beginning heaviest near Duncan Moore's room, the prints were in blood.

"These marks on the wall show that the assassin did, in fact, enter by this passage and return along it. But he did not enter by the open window. The frame of this window was cemented into the casement with dust. This dust was removed only on the inside. Moreover, violence had been used to force it open, and the marks of this violence were all plainly visible on the inside of the frame."

He stopped, remained a moment silent, and then continued:

"This corridor is the usual and customary way—in fact, the only way leading from the north wing of Eastwood Court to the south wing. Duncan Moore alone occupied the south wing. And, sir, on this night, Northcote Moore and yourself alone occupied the north wing. You were both equally familiar with this passage, since you lived in the house, and used it constantly."

Abner paused and looked at Mr. Esdale Moore.

"Shall I go on, sir?" he said.

"Pray do," replied the lawyer.

Abner continued, in his deep, level voice.

"Now, sir, you will realize why Randolph and I felt an instinctive fear of the result of these deductions, and perhaps, sir, why your subconscious conclusions went no further than a premonition."

"But the law of Virginia," put in the Justice, "is no respecter of persons. If the Governor should do a murder, his office would not save him from the gallows."

"It would not," said the lawyer. "Go on, Abner."

My uncle moved slightly in his chair.

"If the aged Duncan Moore were removed," he continued, "Northcote Moore would take the manor-house and the lands. For Esdale Moore to take the estate, both the aged Duncan Moore and the present incumbent must be removed. Only the aged Duncan Moore was removed. Who was planning a gain, then, by this criminal act? Esdale Moore or Northcote Moore?"

"Another significant thing: Mr. Esdale Moore knew this secretary was unlocked on this night; Northcote Moore did not. Who, then, was the more likely to break it open as evidence of a presumptive robbery?"

"And, finally, sir, who would grope along this corridor feeling with his hands for the corners and angles of the wall, one who could see, or a blind man?"

My uncle stopped and sat back in his chair.

The lawyer leaned over and put both arms on the table.

"Gentlemen," he said, since he addressed both Randolph and Abner, "you amaze me! You accuse the most prominent man in Virginia."

"Before the law," said the Justice, "all men are equal."

The lawyer turned toward my uncle, as to one of more consideration.

"While you were making your deductions," he said, "I had to insist that you go on, for I was myself included. I was bound to hear you to the end, although you shocked me at every step. But now, I beg you to reflect. Northcote Moore belongs to an ancient and honorable family. He is old; he is blind. Surely something can be done to save him."

"Nothing," replied the Justice firmly.

Abner lifted his face, placid, unmoving, like a mask.

"Perhaps," he said.

The two men before him at the table moved with astonishment.

"Perhaps!" cried the Justice of the Peace. "This is Virginia!"

But it was the lawyer who was the more amazed. He had not moved; he did not move; but his face, as by some sorcery, became suddenly perplexed.

The tavern was now deserted; every one had gone back into the courthouse. The three men were alone. There was silence except for the noises of the village and the far-off hum of winged insects in the air. Mr. Esdale Moore sat facing north along the upper porch; Abner opposite; Randolph looking eastward toward the courthouse. My uncle did not go on at once. He reached across the table for one of the tobacco cigarettes. The lawyer mechanically took up the box with his hand nearest to the Justice of the Peace and opened the lid with his thumb and finger. Abner selected one but did not light it.

"Writers on the law," he began, "warn us against the obvious inference when dealing with the intelligent criminal agent, and for this reason: while the criminal of the lowest order seeks only to cover his identity, and the criminal of the second order to indicate another rather than himself, the criminal of the first order, sir, will sometimes undertake a subtle finesse—a double intention.

"The criminal of the lowest order gives the authorities no one to suspect. The criminal of the second order sets up a straw man before his own door, hoping to mislead the authorities. But the criminal of the first order sets it before the door of another, expecting the authorities of the state to knock it down and take the man behind it.

"Now, sir,"—my uncle paused—"looked at from this quarter, do not our obvious deductions lack a certain conclusiveness?"

"If Northcote Moore were hanged for murder, Esdale Moore would take the manor-house and the landed estate.

Therefore, he might wish Northcote Moore hanged, just as Northcote Moore might wish Duncan Moore murdered.

"And, if one were deliberately placing a straw man, would there be any inconsistency in breaking open a secretary obviously unlocked? The straw, sir, would be only a trifle more conspicuous!

"And the third deduction"—his gray eyes narrowed, and he spoke slowly: "If one born blind, and another, were accustomed to go along a passage day after day; in the dark, who would grope, feeling his way in the night, step by step, along the angles of the wall—the one who could see, or the blind man?"

The amazed Justice struck the table with his clenched hand.

"By the gods," he cried, "*not the blind man!* For to the blind man, the passage was always dark!"

The lawyer had not moved, but his face, in its desperate perplexity, began to sweat. The Justice swung around upon him, but Abner put out his hand.

"A moment, Randolph," he said. "The human body is a curious structure. It has two sides, as though two similar mechanisms were joined with a central trunk—the dexter side, or that which is toward the south when the man is facing the rising sun, and the sinister side, or that which is toward the north. These sides are not coequal. One of them is controlling and dominates the man, and when the task before him is difficult, it is with this more efficient controlling side that he approaches it.

"Thus, one set on murder and desperately anxious to make no sound, to make no false step, to strike no turn or angle, would instinctively follow the side of the wall that he could feel along with his controlling hand. This passage runs north and south. The bloody finger-prints are all on the west side of the wall, the prints in the dust on the east side; therefore, the assassin followed the east side of the wall when he set out on his deadly errand, and the west side when he returned with the blood on him.

"That is to say," and his voice lifted into a stronger note, "he always followed the left side of the wall.

"Why, sir?" And he got on his feet, his voice ringing, his finger pointing at the sweating, cornered man. "Because his controlling side was on the left—because he was left handed!

"And you, sir—I have been watching you——"

The pent-up energies of Mr. Esdale Moore seemed to burst asunder.

"It's a lie!" he cried.

And he lunged at Abner across the table, with his clenched *left* hand.

The Mystery of Chance

IT WAS a night like the pit. The rain fell steadily. Now and then a gust of wind rattled the shutters, and the tavern sign, painted with the features of George the Third, now damaged by musket-balls and with the eyes burned out, creaked.

The tavern sat on the bank of the Ohio. Below lay the river and the long, flat island, where the ill-starred Blennerhasset had set up his feudal tenure. Flood water covered the island and spread everywhere—a vast sea of yellow that enveloped the meadow-lands and plucked at the fringe of the forest.

The scenes in the tavern were in striking contrast. The place boomed with mirth, shouts of laughter, ribald tales and songs. The whole crew of the *Eldorado* of New Orleans banqueted in the guest-room of the tavern. This was the open room for the public. Beyond it and facing the river was the guest-room for the gentry, with its floor scrubbed with sand, its high-boy in veneered mahogany, its polished andirons and its various pretensions to a hostelry of substance.

At a table in this room, unmindful of the bedlam beyond him, a man sat reading a pamphlet. He leaned over on the table, between two tall brass candlesticks, his elbows on the board, his thumb marking the page. He had the dress and manner of a gentleman—excellent cloth in his coat, a rich stock and imported linen. On the table sat a top hat of the time, and in the corner by the driftwood fire was a portmanteau with silver buckles, strapped up as for a journey. The man was under forty, his features regular and clean-cut; his dark brows joined above eyes big and blue and wholly out of place in the olive skin.

Now and then he got up, went over to the window and looked out, but he was unable to see anything, for the rain con-

tinued and the puffs of wind. He seemed disturbed and uneasy. He drummed on the sill with his fingers, and then, with a glance at his portmanteau, returned to his chair between the two big tallow candles.

From time to time the tavern-keeper looked in at the door with some servile inquiry. This interruption annoyed the guest.

"Damme, man," he said, "are you forever at the door?"

"Shall I give the crew rum, sir?" the landlord asked.

"No," replied the man; "I will not pay your extortions for imported liquor."

"They wish it, sir."

The man looked up from his pamphlet.

"They wish it, eh," he said with nice enunciation. "Well, Mr. Castoe, I do not!"

The soft voice dwelt on the "Mr. Castoe" with ironical emphasis. The mobile upper lip, shadowed with a silken mustache, lifted along the teeth with a curious feline menace.

The man was hardly over his table before the door opened again. He turned abruptly, like a panther, but when he saw who stood in the door, he arose with a formal courtesy.

"You are a day early, Abner," he said. "Are the Virginia wagons in for their salt and iron?"

"They will arrive to-morrow," replied my uncle; "the roads are washed out with the rains."

The man looked at my uncle, his hat and his greatcoat splashed with mud.

"How did you come?" he asked.

"Along the river," replied my uncle, "I thought to find you on the *Eldorado*."

"On the *Eldorado*!" cried the man. "On such a night, when the Tavern of George the Third has a log fire and kegs in the cellar!"

My uncle entered, closed the door, took off his greatcoat and hat, and sat down by the hearth.

"The boat looked deserted," he said.

"To the last nigger," said the man. "I could not take the comforts of the tavern and deny them to the crew."

My uncle warmed his hands over the snapping fire.

"A considerate heart, Byrd," he said, with some deliberation,

"is a fine quality in a man. But how about the owners of your cargo, and the company that insures your boat?"

"The cargo, Abner," replied the man, "is in Benton's warehouse, unloaded for your wagons. The boat is tied up in the back-water. No log can strike it."

He paused and stroked his clean-cut, aristocratic jaw.

"The journey down from Fort Pitt was damnable," he added, "—miles of flood water, yellow and running with an accursed current. It was no pleasure voyage, believe me, Abner. There was the current running logs, and when we got in near the shore, the settlers fired on us. A careless desperado, your settler, Abner!"

"More careless, Byrd, do you think," replied my uncle, "than the river captain who overturns the half-submerged cabins with the wash of his boat?"

"The river," said the man, "is the steamboat's highway."

"And the cabin," replied my uncle, "is the settler's home."

"One would think," said Byrd, "that this home was a palace and the swamp land a garden of the Hesperides, and your settler a King of the Golden Mountains. My stacks are full of bullet holes."

My uncle was thoughtful by the fire.

"This thing will run into a river war," he said. "There will be violence and murder done."

"A war, eh!" echoed the man. "I had not thought of that, and yet, I had but now an ultimatum. When we swung in to-night, a big backwoodsman came out in a canoe and delivered an oration. I have forgotten the periods, Abner, but he would burn me at the stake, I think, and send the boat to Satan, unless I dropped down the river and came in below the settlement."

He paused and stroked his jaw again with that curious gesture.

"But for the creature's command," he added, "I would have made the detour. But when he threatened, I ran in as I liked and the creature got a ducking for his pains. His canoe went bottom upward, and if he had not been a man of oak, he would have gone himself to Satan."

"And what damage did you do?" inquired my uncle.

"Why, no damage, as it happened," said the man. "Some cabins swayed, but not one of them went over. I looked, Abner, for a skirmish in your war. There was more than one rifle at a window. If I were going to follow the river," he continued, "I would mount a six-pounder."

"You will quit the river, then," remarked my uncle.

"It is a dog's life, Abner," said the man. "To make a gain in these days of Yankee trading, the owner must travel with his boat. Captains are a trifle too susceptible to bribe. I do not mean gold-pieces, slipped into the hand, but the hospitalities of the shopkeeper. Your Yankee, Abner, sees no difference in men, or he will waive it for a sixpence in his till. The captain is banqueted at his house, and the cargo is put on short. One cannot sit in comfort at New Orleans and trade along the Ohio."

"Is one, then, so happy in New Orleans?" asked my uncle.

"In New Orleans, no," replied the man, "but New Orleans is not the world. The world is in Piccadilly, where one can live among his fellows like a gentleman, and see something of life—a Venetian dancer, ladies of fashion, and men who dice for something more than a trader's greasy shillings."

Byrd again got up and went to the window. The rain and gusts of wind continued. His anxiety seemed visibly to increase.

My uncle arose and stood with his back to the driftwood fire, his hands spread out to the flame. He glanced at Byrd and at the pamphlet on the table, and the firm muscles of his mouth hardened into an ironical smile.

"Mr. Evelyn Byrd," he said, "what do you read?"

The man came back to the table. He sat down and crossed one elegant knee over the other.

"It is an essay by the Englishman, Mill," he said, "reprinted in the press that Benjamin Franklin set up at Philadelphia. I agree with Lord Fairfax where the estimable Benjamin is concerned: 'Damn his little maxims! They smack too much of New England!' But his press gives now and then an English thing worth while."

"And why is this English essay worth while?" asked my uncle.

"Because, Abner, in its ultimate conclusions, it is a justifica-

tion of a gentleman's most interesting vice. 'Chance,' Mr. Mill demonstrates, 'is not only at the end of all our knowledge, but it is also at the beginning of all our postulates.' We begin with it, Abner, and we end with it. The structure of all our philosophy is laid down on the sills of chance and roofed over with the rafters of it."

"The Providence of God, then," said my uncle, "does not come into Mr. Mill's admirable essay."

Mr. Evelyn Byrd laughed.

"It does not, Abner," he said. "Things happen in this world by chance, and this chance is no aide-de-camp of your God. It happens unconcernedly to all men. It has no rogue to ruin and no good churchman, pattering his prayers, to save. A man lays his plans according to the scope and grasp of his intelligence, and this chance comes by to help him or to harm him, as it may happen, with no concern about his little morals, and with no divine intent."

"And so you leave God out," said my uncle, with no comment.

"And why not, Abner?" replied the man. "Is there any place in this scheme of nature for His intervention? Why, sir, the intelligence of man that your Scriptures so despise can easily put His little plan of rewards and punishments out of joint. Not the good, Abner, but the intelligent, possess the earth. The man who sees on all sides of his plan, and hedges it about with wise precaution, brings it to success. Every day the foresight of men outwits your God."

My uncle lifted his chin above his wet stock. He looked at the window with the night banked behind it, and then down at the refined and elegant gentleman in the chair beside the table, and then at the strapped-up portmanteau in the corner. His great jaw moved out under the massive chin. From his face, from his manner, he seemed about to approach some business of vital import. Then, suddenly, from the room beyond there came a great boom of curses, a cry that the dice had fallen against a platter, a blow and a gust of obscenities and oaths.

My uncle extended his arm toward the room.

"Your gentleman's vice," he said; "eh, Mr. Byrd!"

The man put out a jeweled hand and snuffed the candles.

"The vice, Abner, but not the gentlemen."

Mr. Byrd flicked a bit of soot from his immaculate sleeve. Then he made a careless gesture.

"These beasts," he said, "are the scum of New Orleans. They would bring any practice into disrepute. One cannot illustrate a theory by such creatures. Gaming, Abner, is the diversion of a gentleman; it depends on chance, even as all trading does. The Bishop of London has been unable to point out wherein it is immoral."

"Then," said Abner, "the Bishop does little credit to his intelligence."

"It has been discussed in the coffee-houses of New Orleans," replied Mr. Byrd, "and no worthy objection found."

"I think I can give you one," replied my uncle.

"And what is your objection, Abner?" asked the man.

"It has this objection, if no other," replied my uncle, "it encourages a hope of reward without labor, and it is this hope, Byrd, that fills the jail house with weak men, and sets strong ones to dangerous ventures."

He looked down at the man before him, and again his iron jaw moved.

"Byrd," he said, "under the wisdom of God, labor alone can save the world. It is everywhere before all benefits that we would enjoy. Every man must till the earth before he can eat of its fruits. He must fell the forest and let in the sun before his grain will ripen. He must spin and weave. And in his trading he must labor to carry his surplus stuff to foreign people, and to bring back what he needs from their abundance. Labor is the great condition of reward. And your gentleman's vice, Byrd, would annul it and overturn the world."

But the man was not listening to Abner's words. He was on his feet and again before the window. He had his jaw gathered into his hand. The man swore softly.

"What disturbs you, Byrd?" said my uncle.

He stood unmoving before the fire, his hands to the flame. The man turned quickly.

"It is the night, Abner—wind and driving rain. The devil has it!"

"The weather, Byrd," replied my uncle, "happens in your

philosophy by chance, so be content with what it brings you, for this chance regards, as you tell me, no man's plans; neither the wise man nor the fool hath any favor of it."

"Nor the just nor the unjust, Abner."

My uncle looked down at the floor. He locked his great bronze fingers behind his massive back.

"And so you believe, Byrd," he said. "Well, I take issue with you. I think this thing you call 'chance' is the Providence of God, and I think it favors the just."

"Abner," cried the man, now turning from the window, "if you believe that, you believe it without proof."

"Why, no," replied my uncle; "I have got the proof on this very night."

He paused a moment; then he went on.

"I was riding with the Virginia wagons," he said, "on the journey here. It was my plan to come on slowly with them, arriving on the morrow. But these rains fell; the road on this side of the Hills was heavy; and I determined to leave the wagons and ride in to-night.

"Now, call this what you like—this unforeseen condition of the road, this change of plan. Call it 'chance,' Byrd!"

Again he paused and his big jaw tightened.

"But it is no chance, sir, nor any accidental happening that Madison of Virginia, Simon Carroll of Maryland and my brother Rufus are upright men, honorable in their dealings and fair before the world.

"Now, sir, if this chance, this chance of my coming on to-night before the Virginia wagons, this accidental happening, favored Madison, Simon Carroll and my brother Rufus as though with a direct and obvious intent, as though with a clear and preconceived design, you will allow it to me as a proof, or, at least, Mr. Evlyn Byrd, as a bit of evidence, as a sort of indisputable sign, that honorable men, men who deal fairly with their fellows, have some favor of these inscrutable events."

The man was listening now with a careful attention. He came away from the window and stood beside the table, his clenched fingers resting on the board.

"What do you drive at, Abner?" he asked.

My uncle lifted his chin above the big wet stock.

"A proof of my contention, Byrd," he answered.

"But your story, Abner? What happened?"

My uncle looked down at the man.

"There is no hurry, Byrd," he said; "the night is but half advanced and you will not now go forward on your journey."

"My journey!" echoed the man. "What do you mean?"

"Why, this," replied my uncle: "that you would be setting out for Piccadilly, I imagine, and the dancing women, and the gentlemen who live by chance. But as you do not go now, we have ample leisure for our talk."

"Abner," cried Mr. Byrd, "what is this riddle?"

My uncle moved a little in his place before the fire.

"I left the Virginia wagons at midday," he went on; "night fell in the flatland; I could hardly get on; the mud was deep and the rains blew. The whole world was like the pit.

"It is a common belief that a horse can see on any night, however dark, but this belief is error, like that which attributes supernatural perception to the beast. My horse went into the trees and the fence; now and then there was a candle in a window, but it did not lighten the world; it served only to accentuate the darkness. It seemed impossible to go forward on a strange road, now flooded. I thought more than once to stop in at some settler's cabin. But mark you, Byrd, I came on. Why? I cannot say. 'Chance,' Mr. Evelyn Byrd, if you like. I would call it otherwise. But no matter."

He paused a moment, and then continued:

"I came in by the river. It was all dark like the kingdom of Satan. Then, suddenly, I saw a light and your boat tied up. This light seemed somewhere inside, and its flame puzzled me. I got down from my horse and went onto the steamboat. I found no one, but I found the light. It was a fire just gathering under way. A carpenter had been at work; he had left some shavings and bits of candle, and in this line of rubbish the fire had started."

The man sat down in his chair beside the two tallow candles.

"Fire!" he said. "Yes, there was a carpenter at work in my

office cabin to-day. He left shavings, and perhaps bits of candle, it is likely. Was it in my office cabin?"

"Along the floor there," replied my uncle, "beginning to flame up."

"Along the floor!" repeated Mr. Byrd. "Then nothing in my cabin was burned? The wall desk, Abner, with the long mahogany drawer—it was not burned?"

He spoke with an eager interest.

"It was not burned," replied my uncle. "Did it contain things of value?"

"Of great value," returned the man.

"You leave, then, things of value strangely unprotected," replied my uncle. "The door was open."

"But not the desk, Abner. It was securely locked. I had that lock from Sheffield. No key would turn it but my own."

Byrd sat for some moments unmoving, his delicate hand fingering his chin, his lips parted. Then, as with an effort, he got back his genial manner.

"I thank you, Abner," he said. "You have saved my boat. And it was a strange coincidence that brought you there to do it."

Then he flung back in his big chair with a laugh.

"But your theory, Abner? This chance event does not support it. It is not the good or Christian that this coincidence has benefited. It is I, Abner, who am neither good nor Christian."

My uncle did not reply. His face remained set and reflective.

The rain beat on the window-pane, and the drunken feast went on in the room beyond him.

"Byrd," he said, "how do you think that fire was set? A half-burned cigar dropped by a careless hand, or an enemy?"

"An enemy, Abner," replied the man. "It will be the work of these damned settlers. Did not their envoy threaten if I should come in, to the peril of their cabins? I gave them no concern then, but I was wrong in that. I should have looked out for their venom. Still, they threaten with such ease and with no hand behind it that one comes, in time, to take no notice of their words."

He paused and looked up at the big man above him.

"What do you think, Abner? Was the fire set?"

"One cannot tell from the burning rubbish," replied my uncle.

"But your opinion, Abner?" said the man. "What is your opinion?"

"The fire was set," replied my uncle.

Byrd got up at that, and his clenched hand crashed on the table.

"Then, by the kingdom of Satan, I will overturn every settler's cabin when the boat goes out tomorrow."

My uncle gave no attention to the man's violence.

"You would do wanton injury to innocent men," he said. "The settlers did not fire your boat."

"How can you know that, Abner?"

My uncle changed. Vigor and energy and an iron will got into his body and his face.

"Byrd," he said, "we had an argument just now; let me recall it to your attention. You said 'chance' happened equally to all, and I that the Providence of God directs it. If I had failed to come on to-night, the boat would have burned. The settlers would have taken blame for it. And Madison of Virginia, Simon Carroll of Maryland and my brother Rufus, whose company at Baltimore insure your boat, would have met a loss they can ill afford."

His voice was hard and level like a sheet of light.

"Not you, Byrd, who, as you tell me, are neither good nor Christian, but these men, who are, would have settled for this loss. Is it the truth—eh, Mr. Evlyn Byrd?"

The man's big blue eyes widened in his olive skin.

"I should have claimed the insurance, of course, as I had the right to do," he said coldly, for he was not in fear. "But, Abner——"

"Precisely!" replied my uncle. "And now, Mr. Evlyn Byrd, let us go on. We had a further argument. You thought a man in his intelligence could outwit God. And, sir, you undertook to do it! With your crew drunken here, the boat deserted, the settlers to bear suspicion and your portmanteau packed up for your journey overland to Baltimore, you watched at that window to see the flames burst out."

The man's blue eyes—strange, incredible eyes in that olive skin—were now hard and expressionless as glass. His lips moved, and his hand crept up toward a bulging pocket of his satin waistcoat.

Grim, hard as iron, inevitable, my uncle went on:

"But you failed, Byrd! God outwitted you! When I put that fire out in the rubbish, the cabin was dark, and in the dark, Byrd, there, I saw a gleam of light shining through the key-hole of your wall desk—the desk that you alone can open, that you keep so securely locked. Three bits of candle were burning in that empty drawer."

The man's white hand approached the bulging pocket.

And my uncle's voice rang as over a plate of steel.

"Outwit God!" he cried. "Why, Byrd, you had forgotten a thing that any schoolboy could have told you. You had forgotten that a bit of candle in a drawer, for lack of air, burns more slowly than a bit outside. Your pieces set to fire the rubbish were consumed, but your pieces set in that locked drawer to make sure—to outwit God, if, by chance, the others failed—were burning when I burst the lid off."

The man's nimble hand, lithe like a snake, whipped a derring out of his bulging pocket.

But, quicker than that motion, quicker than light, quicker than the eye, my uncle was upon him. The derringer fell harmless to the floor. The bones of the man's slender fingers snapped in an iron palm. And my uncle's voice, big, echoing like a trumpet, rang above the storm and the drunken shouting:

"Outwit God! Why, Mr. Evelyn Byrd, you cannot outwit me, who am the feeblest of His creatures!"

15

The Concealed Path

IT WAS NIGHT, and the first snow of October was in the air when my uncle got down from his horse before the door. The great stone house sat on a bench of the mountains. Behind it lay the forest, and below, the pasture land of the Hills.

After the disastrous failure of Prince Charles Edward Stuart to set up his kingdom in Scotland, more than one great Highland family had fled oversea to Virginia, and for a hundred years had maintained its customs. It was at the house of such a family that my uncle stopped.

There was the evidence of travel hard and long on my uncle and his horse. An old man bade him enter.

"Who is here?" said my uncle.

The servant replied with two foreign words, meaning "The Red Eagle" in the Gaelic tongue.

And he led my uncle through the hall into the dining-room. It was a scene laid back a hundred years in Skye that he came on. A big woman of middle age dined alone, in a long, beamed room, lighted with tallow candles. An ancient servant stood behind her chair.

Two features of the woman were conspicuous—her bowed nose and her coarse red hair.

She got up when she saw my uncle.

"Abner," she cried, "by the Blessed God I am glad to see you! Come in! Come in!"

My uncle entered, and she put him beyond her at the table.

"You ought to eat, Abner," she said; "for by all the tokens, you have traveled."

"A long way," replied my uncle.

"And did the ravens of Elijah send you to me?" said the woman. "For I need you."

"What need?" inquired my uncle, while he attacked the rib of beef and the baked potatoes, for the dinner, although set with some formality, was plain.

"Why, this need, Abner: For a witness whose name will stand against the world."

"A witness!" repeated my uncle.

"Aye, a witness," continued the woman. "The country holds me hard and dour, and given to impose my will. There will be a wedding in my house to-night, and I would have you see it, free of pressure. My niece, Margaret McDonald, has got her senses finally."

My uncle looked down at the cloth.

"Who is the man?" he said.

"Campbell," she answered, "and good man enough for a stupid woman."

For a moment my uncle did not move. His hands, his body, the very muscles in his eyelids, were for that moment inert as plaster. Then he went on with the potato and the rib of beef.

"Campbell is here, then?" he said.

"He came to-night," replied the woman, "and for once the creature has some spirit. He will have the girl to-night or never. He and my husband Allen Elliott, have driven their cattle out of the glades and on the way to Baltimore. Allen is with the cattle on the Cumberland road, and Campbell rode hard in here to take the girl or to leave her. And whether she goes or stays, he will not return. When the cattle are sold in Baltimore, he will take a ship out of the Chesapeake for Glasgow."

She paused and made a derisive gesture.

"The devil, Abner, or some witch trick, has made a man of Campbell. He used to be irresolute and sullen, but to-night he has the spirit of the men who lifted cattle in the lowlands. He is a Campbell of Glen Lion on this night. Believe me, Abner, the wavering beastie is now as hard as oak, and has the devil's courage. Wherefore is it that a man can change like that?"

"A man may hesitate between two masters," replied my uncle, "and be only weak, but when he finally makes his choice he will get what his master has to give him—the cour-

age of heaven, if he go that way, or of hell, Madam, if he go that way."

"Man! Man!" she laughed. "If 'the one who is not to be named,' as we say, put his spirit into Campbell, he did a grand work. It is the wild old cattle-lifter of Glen Lion that he is the night!"

"Do you think," said my uncle, "that a McDonald of Glencoe ought to be mated with a Campbell of Glen Lion?"

The woman's face hardened.

"Did Lord Stair and the Campbells of Glen Lion massacre the McDonalds of Glencoe on yesterday at sunrise, or two hundred years back? Margaret—the fool!—said that before she got my final word."

"Is it not in an adage," said my uncle, "that the Highlander does not change?"

"But the world changes, Abner," replied the woman. "Campbell is not 'Bonnie Charlie'; he is at middle age, a dour man and silent, but he will have a sum of money from a half of the cattle, and he can take care of this girl."

Then she cried out in a sharper voice:

"And what is here in this mountain for her, will you tell me? We grow poor! The old men are to feed. Allen owes money that his half of the cattle will hardly pay. Even old MacPherson"—and she indicated the ancient man behind her chair—"has tried to tell her, in his wise-wife folderol, 'I see you in the direst peril that overtakes a lassie, and a big shouldered man to save you.' And it was no omen, Abner, but the vision of his common sense. Here are the lean years to dry out the fool's youth, and surely Campbell is big shouldered enough for any prophecy. And now, Abner, will you stay and be a witness?"

"I will be one witness," replied my uncle slowly, "if you will send for my brother Rufus to be another."

The woman looked at her guest in wonder.

"That would be twenty miles through the Hills," she said. "We could not get Rufus by the morn's morn."

"No," said Abner, "it would be three miles to Maxwell's Tavern. Rufus is there to-night."

The big-nosed, red-haired woman drummed on the cloth with the tips of her fingers, and one knew what she was thinking. Her relentless will was the common talk. What she wished she forced with no concern.

But the girl was afraid of Campbell. The man seemed evil to her. It was not evidenced in any act. It was instinct in the girl. She felt the nature of the man like some venomous thing pretending to be gentle until its hour. And this fear, dominant and compelling, gave her courage to resist the woman's will.

The long suit of Campbell for the girl was known to everybody, and the woman's favor of it and the girl's resistance. The woman foresaw what folk in the Hills would say, and she wished to forestall that gossip by the presence in her house of men whose word could not be gainsaid. If Abner and his brother Rufus were here, no report of pressure on the girl could gain belief.

She knew what reports her dominating personality set current. She, and not her husband, was the head of their affairs, and with an iron determination she held to every Highland custom, every form, every feudal detail that she could, against the detritus of democratic times and ridicule, and the gain upon her house of poverty, and lean years. She was alone at that heavy labor. Allen Elliott was a person without force. He was usually on his cattle range in the mountains, with his big partner Campbell, or in the great drive, as now, to Baltimore. And she had the world to face.

"That will be to wait," she said, "and Campbell is in haste, and the bride is being made ready by the women, and the minister is got . . . to Maxwell's Tavern!"

Then she arose.

"Well, I will make a bargain with you. I will send for Rufus, but you must gain Campbell over to the waiting. And you must gain him, Abner, by your own devices, for I will not tell him that I have sent out for a witness to the freedom of my niece in this affair. If you can make him wait, the thing shall wait until Rufus is come. But I will turn no hand to help.

"Is Campbell in the house?" said my uncle.

"Yes," she said, "and ready when the minister is come."

"Is he alone?" said Abner.

"Alone," she said, with a satirical smile, "as a bridegroom ought to be for his last reflections."

"Then," replied my uncle, "I will strike the bargain."

She laughed in a heavy chuckle, like a man.

"Hold him if you can. It will be a pretty undertaking, Abner, and practice for your wits. But by stealth it shall be. I will not have you bind the bridegroom like the strong man in the Scriptures." And the chuckle deepened. "And that, too, I think, might be no easier than the finesse you set at. He is a great man in the body, like yoursel'."

She stood up to go out, but before she went, she said another word.

"Abner," she said, "you will not blame me," and her voice was calm. "Somebody must think a little for these pretty fools. They are like the lilies of the field in their lack of wisdom; they will always bloom, and there is no winter! Why, man, they have no more brain than a haggis! And what are their little loves against the realities of life? And their tears, Abner, are like the rains in summer, showering from every cloud. And their heads crammed with folderol—a prince will come, and they cannot take a good man for that dream!" She paused and added:

"I will go and send for Rufus. And when you have finished with your dinner, MacPherson will take you in to Campbell."

The woman was hardly gone before the old man slipped over to Abner's chair.

"Mon," he whispered, "ha'e ye a wee drop?"

"No liquor, MacPherson," said my uncle.

The old man's bleared eyes blinked like a half-blinded owl's.

"It would be gran', a wee drop, the night," he said.

"For joy at the wedding," said my uncle.

"Na, mon, na, mon!" Then he looked swiftly around.

"The eagle ha beak and talons, and what ha the dove, mon?"

"What do you mean, MacPherson?" said my uncle.

The old creature peered across the table.

"Ye ha gran' shoulders, mon," he said.

My uncle put down his fork.

"MacPherson," he said, "what do you beat about?"

"I wa borned," he replied, "wi a cowl, and I can see!"

"And what do you see?" inquired Abner.

"A vulture flying," said the old man, "but it is unco dark beneath him."

Again on this night every motion and every sign of motion disappeared from my uncle's body and his face. He remained for a moment like a figure cut in wood.

"A vulture!" he echoed.

"Aye, mon! What ha the dove to save it?"

"The vulture, it may be," said my uncle.

"The Red Eagle, and the foul vulture!" cried the old man. "Noo, mon, it is the bird of death!"

"A bird of death, but not a bird of prey." Then he got up.

"You may have a familiar spirit, MacPherson," he said coldly, "for all I know. Perhaps they live on after the Witch of Endor. It is a world of mystery. But I should not come to you to get up Samuel, and I see now why the Lord stamped out your practice. It was because you misled his people. If there is a vulture in this business, MacPherson, it is no symbol of your bridegroom. And now, will take me in to Campbell?"

The old man flung the door open, and Abner went out into the hall. As he crossed the sill, a girl, listening at the door, fled past him. She had been crouched down against it.

She was half-dressed, all in white, as though escaped for a moment out of the hands of tiring women. But she had the chalk face of a ghost, and eyes wide with fear.

My uncle went on as though he had passed nothing, and the old Scotchman before him only wagged his head, with the whispered comment, "It wa be gran', a wee drop, the night."

They came into a big room of the house with candles on a table, and a fire of chestnut logs. A man walking about stopped on the hearth. He was a huge figure of a man in middle life.

A fierce light leaped up in his face when he saw my uncle.

"Abner!" he cried. "Why does the devil bring you here?"

"It would be strange, Campbell," replied my uncle, "if the devil were against you. The devil has been much maligned. He is very nearly equal, the Scriptures tell us, to the King of Kings. He is no fool to mislead his people and to trap his

servants. I find him always zealous in their interests, Campbell, fertile in devices, and holding hard with every trick to save them. I do not admire the devil, Mr. Campbell, but I do not find his vice to be a lack of interest in his own."

"Then," cried Campbell, "it is clear that I am not one of his own. For if the devil were on my side, Abner, he would have turned you away from this door to-night."

"Why, no," replied my uncle, with a reflective air, "that does not follow. I do not grant the devil a supreme control. There is One above him, and if he cannot always manage as his people wish, they shall not for that reason condemn him with a treasonable intent."

The man turned with a decisive gesture.

"Abner," he said, "let me understand this thing. Do you come here upon some idle gossip, to interfere with me in this marriage? Or by chance?"

"Neither the one nor the other," replied my uncle. "I went into the mountains to buy the cattle you and Elliott range there. I found you gone already, with the herd, toward Maryland. And so, as I returned, I rode in here to Elliott's house to rest and to feed my horse."

"Elliott is with the drove," said Campbell.

"No," replied my uncle, "Elliott is not with the drove. I overtook it on the Cheat River. The drivers said you hired them this morning, and rode away."

The man shifted his feet and looked down at my uncle.

"It is late in the season," he said. "One must go ahead to arrange for a field and for some shocks of fodder. Elliott is ahead."

"He is not on the road ahead," returned Abner. "Arnold and his drovers came that way from Maryland, and they had not seen him."

"He did not go the road," said Campbell; "he took a path through the mountains."

My uncle remained silent for some moments.

"Campbell," said my uncle, "the Scriptures tell us that there is a path which the vulture's eye hath not seen. Did Elliott take that path?"

The man changed his posture.

"Now, Abner," he said, "I cannot answer a fool thing like that."

"Well, Campbell," replied my uncle, "I can answer it for you: Eliott did not take that path."

The man took out a big silver watch and opened the case with his thumb-nail.

"The woman ought to be ready," he said.

My uncle looked up at him.

"Campbell," he said, "put off this marriage."

The man turned about.

"Why should I put it off?" he said.

"Well, for one reason, Campbell," replied my uncle, "the omens are not propitious."

"I do not believe in signs," said the man.

"The Scriptures are full of signs," returned Abner. "There was the sign to Joshua and the sign to Ahaz, and there is the sign to you."

The man turned with an oath.

"What accursed thing do you hint about, Abner?"

"Campbell," replied my uncle, "I accept the word; accursed is the word."

"Say the thing out plain! What omen? What sign?"

"Why, this sign," replied Abner: "MacPherson, who was born with a cowl, has seen a vulture flying."

"Damme, man!" cried Campbell. "Do you hang on such a piece of foolery. MacPherson sees his visions in a tin cup—raw corn liquor would set flying beasts of Patmos. Do you tell me, Abner, that you believe in what MacPherson sees?"

"I believe in what I see myself," replied my uncle.

"And what have you seen?" said the man.

"I have seen the vulture!" replied my uncle. "And I was born clean and have no taste for liquor."

"Abner," said Campbell, "you move about in the dark, and I have no time to grope after you. The woman should be ready."

"But are you ready?" said my uncle.

"Man! Man!" cried Campbell. "Will you be forever in a fog? Well, travel on to Satan in it! I am ready, and here are the women!"

But it was not the bride. It was MacPherson to inquire if the bride should come.

My uncle got up then.

"Campbell," he said, in his deep, level voice, "if the bride is ready, you are not."

The man was at the limit of forbearance.

"The devil take you!" he cried. "If you mean anything, say what it is!"

"Campbell," replied my uncle, "it is the custom to inquire if any man knows a reason why a marriage should not go on. Shall I stand up before the company and give the reason, while the marriage waits? Or shall I give it to you here while the marriage waits?"

The man divined something behind my uncle's menace.

"Bid them wait," he said to MacPherson.

Then he closed the door and turned back on my uncle—his shoulders thrown forward, his fingers clenched, his words prefaced by an oath.

"Now, sir,"—and the oath returned,——"what is it?"

My uncle got up, took something from his pocket, and put it down on the table. It was a piece of lint, twisted together, as though one had rolled it firmly between the palms of one's hands.

"Campbell," he said, "as I rode the trail on your cattle range, in the mountains, this morning, a bit of white thing caught my eye. I got down and picked up this fragment of lint on the hard ground. It puzzled me. How came it thus rolled? I began to search the ground, riding slowly in an ever-widening circle. Presently I found a second bit, and then a third, rolled hard together like the first. Then I observed a significant thing: these bits were in line and leading from your trail down the slope of the cattle range to the border of the forest. I went back to the trail, and there on the baked earth, in line with these bits of lint, I found a spot where a bucket of water had been poured out."

Campbell was standing beyond him, staring at the bit of lint. He looked up without disturbing the crouch of his shoulders.

"Go on," he said.

"It occurred to me," continued my uncle, "that perhaps these bits of lint might be found above the trail, as I had found them below it, and so I rode straight on up the hill to a rail fence. I found no fragment of twisted stuff, but I found another thing, Campbell: I found the weeds trampled on the other side of the fence. I got down and looked closely. On the upper surface of a flat rail, immediately before the trampled weeds, there was an impression as though a square bar of iron had been laid across it."

My uncle stopped. And Campbell said:

"Go on."

Abner remained a moment, his eyes on the man; then he continued:

"The impression was in a direct line toward the point on the trail where the water had been poured out. I was puzzled. I got into the saddle and rode back across the trail and down the line of the fragments of lint. At the edge of the forest I found where a log-heap had been burned. I got down again and walked back along the line of the twisted lint. I looked closely, and I saw that the fragments of dried grass, and now and then a rag-weed, had been pressed down, as though by something moving down the hillside from the trail to the burned log-heap.

"Now, Campbell," he said, "what happened on that hillside?"

Campbell stood up and looked my uncle in the face. "What do you think happened?" he said.

"I think," replied Abner, "that some one sat in the weeds behind the fence with a half-stocked, square-barreled rifle laid on the flat rail, and from that ambush shot something passing on the trail, and then dragged it down the hillside to the log-heap. I think that poured-out water was to wash away the blood where the thing fell. I do not know where the bits of lint came from, but I think they were rolled there under the weight of the heavy body. Do I think correctly, eh, Campbell?"

"You do," said the man.

My uncle was astonished, for Campbell faced him, his aspect grim, determined, like one who at any hazard will have the whole of a menace out. "Abner," he said, "you have

trailed this thing with some theory behind it. In plain words, what is that theory?"

My uncle was amazed.

"Campbell," he replied, "since you wish the thing said plain, I will not obscure it. Two men own a great herd of cattle between them. The herd is to be driven over the mountains to Baltimore and sold. If one of the partners is shot out of his saddle and the crime concealed, may not the other partner sell the entire drove for his own and put the whole sum in his pocket?"

"And if this surviving partner, Campbell, were a man taken with the devil's resolution, I think he might try to make one great stroke of this business. I think he might hire men to drive his cattle, giving out that his partner had gone on ahead, and then turn back for the woman he wanted, take her to Baltimore, put her on the ship, sell the cattle, and with the woman and money sail out of the Chesapeake for the Scotch Highlands he came from! Who could say what became of the missing partner, or that he did not receive his half of the money and meet robbery and murder on his way home?"

My uncle stopped. And Campbell broke out into a great ironical laugh.

"Now, let this thing be a lesson to you, Abner. Your little deductions are correct, but your great conclusion is folly.

"We had a wild heifer that would not drive, so we butchered the beast. I had great trouble to shoot her, but I finally managed it from behind the fence."

"But the bits of lint," said my uncle, "and the washed spot?"

"Abner," cried the man, "do you handle cattle for a lifetime and do not know how blood disturbs them? We did not want them in commotion, so we drenched the place where the heifer fell. And your bits of lint! I will discover the mystery there. To keep the blood off we put an old quilt under the yearling and dragged her down the hill on that. The bits of lint were from the quilt, and rolled thus under the weight of the heifer."

Then he added: "That was weeks ago, but there has been no rain for a month, and these signs of crime, Abner, were providentially preserved against your coming!"

"And the log-heap," said my uncle, like one who would have the whole of an explanation, "why was it burned?"

"Now, Abner," continued the man, "after your keen deductions, would you ask me a thing like that? To get rid of the offal from the butchered beast. We would not wash out the blood-stains and leave that to set our cattle mad."

His laugh changed to a note of victory.

"And now, Abner," he cried, "will you stay and see me married, who have come hoping to see me hanged?"

My uncle had moved over to the window. While Campbell spoke, he seemed to listen, not so much to the man as to sounds outside. Now far off on a covered wooden bridge of the road there was the faint sound of horses. And with a grim smile Abner turned about.

"I will stay," he said, "and see which it is."

It was the very strangest wedding—the big, determined woman like a Fate, the tattered servants with candles in their hands, the minister, and the bride covered and hidden in her veil, like a wooden figure counterfeiting life.

The thing began. There was an atmosphere of silence. My uncle went over to the window. The snow on the road deadened the sounds of the advancing horses, until the iron shoes rang on the stones before the door. Then, suddenly, as though he waited for the sound, he cried out with a great voice against the marriage. The big-nosed, red-haired woman turned on him:

"Why do you object, who have no concern in this thing?"

"I object," said Abner, "because Campbell has sent Eliott on the wrong path!"

"The wrong path!" cried the woman.

"Aye," said Abner, "on the wrong path. There is a path which the vulture's eye hath not seen, Job tells us. But the path Campbell sent Eliott on, the vulture did see."

He advanced with great strides into the room.

"Campbell," he cried, "before I left your accursed pasture, I saw a buzzard descend into the forest beyond your log-heap. I went in, and there, shot through the heart, was the naked body of Allen Eliott. Your log-heap, Campbell, was to burn the

quilt and the dead man's clothes. You trusted to the vultures, for the rest, and the vultures, Campbell, over-reached you."

My uncle's voice rose and deepened.

"I sent word to my brother Rufus to raise a *posse comitatus* and bring it to Maxwell's Tavern. Then I rode in here to rest and to feed my horse. I found you, Campbell, on the second line of your hell-planned venture!

"I got Mrs. Elliott to send for Rufus to be a witness with me to your accursed marriage. And I undertook to delay it until he came."

He raised his great arm, the clenched bronze fingers big like the coupling pins of a cart.

"I would have stopped it with my own hand," he said, "but I wanted the men of the Hills to hang you. . . . And they are here."

There was a great sound of tramping feet in the hall outside.

And while the men entered, big, grim, determined men, Abner called out their names:

"Arnold, Randolph, Stuart, Elnathan Stone and my brother Rufus!"

16

The Edge of the Shadow

IT WAS A LAND of strange varieties of courage. But, even in the great hills, I never saw a man like Cyrus Mansfield. He was old and dying when this ghastly adventure happened; but, even in the extremity of life, with its terrors on him, he met the thing with his pagan notions of the public welfare, and it is for his own gods to judge him.

It was a long afternoon of autumn. The dead man lay in the whitewashed cabin staring up at the cobwebbed ceiling. His left cheek below the eye was burned with the brand of a pistol shot. The track of a bullet ran along the eyebrow, plowing into the skull above the ear. His grizzled hair stood up like a brush, and the fanaticism of his face was exaggerated by the strained postures of death.

A tall, gaunt woman sat by the door in the sun. She had a lapful of honey locust, and she worked at that, putting the pieces together in a sort of wreath. The branches were full of thorns, and the inside of the woman's hand was torn and wounded upon the balls of the fingers and the palm, but she plaited the thorns together, giving no heed to her injured hand.

She did not get up when my Uncle Abner and Squire Randolph entered. She sat over her work with imperturbable stoicism.

The man and woman were strangers in the land, preëmpting one of Mansfield's cabins. Their mission was a mystery for conjecture. And now the man's death was a mystery beyond it.

When Randolph inquired *how* the man had met his death, the woman got up, without a word, went to a cupboard in the wall, took out a dueling pistol, and handed it to him. Then, she spoke in a dreary voice:

"He was mad. 'The cause,' he said, 'must have a sacrifice of blood.' "

She looked steadily at the dead man.

"Ah, yes," she added, "he was mad!"

Then she turned about and went back to her chair in the sun before the door.

Randolph and Abner examined the weapon. It was a handsome dueling pistol, with an inlaid silver stock and a long, octagon barrel of hard, sharp-edged steel. It had been lately fired, for the exploded percussion cap was still on the nipple.

"He was a poor shot," said Randolph; "he very nearly missed."

My uncle looked closely at the dead man's wound and the burned cheek beneath it. He turned the weapon slowly in his hand, but Randolph was impatient.

"Well, Abner," he said, "did the pistol kill him, or was it the finger of God?"

"The pistol killed him," replied my uncle.

"And shall we believe the woman, eh, Abner?"

"I am willing to believe her," replied my uncle.

They looked about the cabin. There was blood on the floor and flecked against the wall, and stains on the barrel of the pistol, as though the man had staggered about, stunned by the bullet, before he died. And so the wound looked—not mortal on the instant, but one from which, after some time, a man might die.

Randolph wrote down his memorandum, and the two went out into the road.

It was an afternoon of Paradise. The road ran in a long endless ribbon westward toward the Ohio. Negroes in the wide bottom land were harvesting the corn and setting it up in great bulging shocks tied with grapevine. Beyond on a high wooded knoll, stood a mansion-house with white pillars.

My uncle took the duelling pistol out of his pocket and handed it to the Justice of the Peace.

"Randolph," he said, "these weapons were made in pairs; there should be another. And," he added, "there is a crest on the butt plate."

"Virginia is full of such folderols," replied the Justice, "and

bought and sold, pledged and traded. It would not serve to identify the dead man. And besides, Abner, why do we care? He is dead by his own hand; his rights and his injuries touch no other; let him lie with his secrets."

He made a little circling gesture upward with his index finger.

" 'Duncan is dead,' " he quoted. " 'After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.' Shall we pay our respects to Mansfield before we ride away?"

And he indicated the house like a white cornice on the high cliff above them.

They had been standing with their backs to the cabin door. Now the woman passed them. She wore a calico sunbonnet, and carried a little bundle tied up in a cotton handkerchief. She set out westward along the road toward the Ohio. She walked slowly, like one bound on an interminable journey.

Moved by some impulse they looked in at the cabin door. The dead man lay as he had been, his face turned toward the ceiling, his hands grotesquely crossed, his body rigid. But now the sprigs of honey locust, at which the woman worked, were pressed down on his unkempt grizzled hair. The sun lay on the floor, and there was silence.

They left the cabin with no word and climbed the long path to the mansion on the hill.

Mansfield sat in a great chair on the pillared porch. It was wide and cool, paved with colored tiles carried over from England in a sailing ship.

He was the strangest man I have ever seen. He was old and dying then, but he had a spirit in him that no event could bludgeon into servility. He sat with a gray shawl pinned around his shoulders. The lights and shadows of the afternoon fell on his jaw like a plowshare, on his big, crooked, bony nose, on his hard gray eyes, bringing them into relief against the lines and furrows of his face.

"Mansfield," cried Randolph, "how do you do?"

"I still live," replied the old man, "but at any hour I may be ejected out of life."

"We all live, Mansfield," said my uncle, "as long as God wills."

"Now, Abner," cried the old man, "you repeat the jargon of the churches. The will of man is the only power in the universe, so far as we can find out, that is able to direct the movements of events. Nothing else that exists can make the most trivial thing happen or cease to happen. No imagined god or demon in all the history of the race has ever influenced the order of events as much as the feeblest human creature in an hour of life. Sit down, Abner, and let me tell you the truth before I cease to exist, as the beasts of the field cease."

He indicated the great carved oak chairs about him, and the two visitors sat down.

Randolph loved the vanities of argument, and he thrust in:

"I am afraid, Mansfield," he said, "you will never enjoy the pleasures of Paradise."

The old man made a contemptuous gesture.

"Pleasure, Randolph," he said, "is the happiness of little men; big men are after something more. They are after the satisfaction that comes from directing events. This is the only happiness: to crush out every other authority—to be the one dominating authority—to make events take the avenue one likes. This is the happiness of the god of the universe, if there is any god of the universe."

He moved in his chair, his elbows out, his fingers extended, his bony face uplifted.

"Abner," he cried, "I am willing for you to endure life as you find it and say it is the will of God, but, as for me, I will not be cowed into submission. I will not be held back from laying hold of the lever of the great engine merely because the rumble of the machinery fills other men with terror."

"Mansfield," replied my uncle, in his deep, level voice, "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom."

The old man moved his extended arms with a powerful threshing motion, like a vulture beating the air with its great wings.

"Fear!" he cried. "Why, Abner, fear is the last clutch of the animal clinging to the intelligence of man as it emerges from the instinct of the beast. The first man thought the monsters about him were gods. Our fathers thought the elements were gods, and we think the impulse moving the machinery of the

world is the will of some divine authority. And always the only thing in the universe that was superior to these things has been afraid to assert itself. The human will that can change things, that can do as it likes, has been afraid of phantasms that never yet met with anything they could turn aside."

He clenched his hands, contracted his elbows, and brought them down with an abrupt derisive gesture.

"I do not understand," he said, "but I am not afraid. I will not be beaten into submission by vague, inherited terrors. I will not be subservient to things that have a lesser power than I have. I will not yield the control of events to elements that are dead, to laws that are unthinking, or to an influence that cannot change.

"Not all the gods that man has ever worshiped can make things happen to-morrow, but I can make them happen; therefore, I am a god above them. And how shall a god that is greater than these gods give over the dominion of events into their hands?"

"And so, Mansfield," said Abner, "you have been acting just now upon this belief?"

The old man turned his bony face sharply on my uncle.

"Now, Abner," he said, "what do you mean by this Delphic sentence?"

For reply, my uncle extended his arms toward the white-washed cabin.

"Who is the dead man down there?"

"Randolph can tell you that," said Mansfield.

"I never saw the man until to-day," replied the Justice.

"Eh, Randolph," cried the old man, "do you administer the law and have a memory like that? In midsummer the justices sat at the county seat. Have you forgot that inquisition?"

"I have not," said the Justice. "It was a fool's inquiry. One of Nixon's Negro women reported a slave plot to poison the wells and attack the people with a curious weapon. She got the description of the weapon out of some preacher's sermon—a kind of spear. If she had named some implement of modern warfare, we could have better credited her story."

"Well, Randolph," cried the old man, "for all the wisdom of your justices, she spoke the truth. They were pikes the woman

saw, and not the spears of the horsemen of Israel. Did you notice a stranger who remained in a corner of the courtroom while the justices were sitting? He disappeared after the trial. But did you mark him, Randolph? He lies dead down yonder in my Negro cabin."

A light came into the face of the Justice.

"By the Eternal," he cried, "an abolitionist!"

He flipped the gold seals on his watch fob; then he added, with that little circling gesture of his finger:

"Well, he has taken himself away with his own hands."

"He is dead," said Mansfield, thrusting out his plowshare jaw, "as all such vermin ought to be. We are too careless in the South of these vicious reptiles. We ought to stamp them out of life whenever we find them. They are a menace to the peace of the land. They incite the slaves to arson and to murder. They are beyond the law, as the panther and the wolf are. We ought to have the courage to destroy the creatures.

"The destiny of this republic," he added, "is in our hands."

My Uncle Abner spoke then:

"It is in God's hands," he said.

"God!" cried Mansfield. "I would not give house room to such a god! When we dawdle, Abner, the Yankees always beat us. Why, man, if this thing runs on, it will wind up in a lawsuit. We shall be stripped of our property by a court's writ. And instead of imposing our will on this republic, we shall be answering a little New England lawyer with rejoinders and rebuttals."

"Would the bayonet be a better answer?" said my uncle.

"Now, Abner," said Mansfield, "you amuse me. These Yankees have no stomach for the bayonet. They are traders, Abner; they handle the shares and the steel-yard."

My uncle looked steadily at the man.

"Virginia held that opinion of New England when the King's troops landed," he said. "It was a common belief. Why, sir, even Washington riding north to the command of the Colonial army, when he heard of the battle of Bunker Hill, did not ask who had won; his only inquiry was, 'Did the militia of Massachusetts fight? It did fight, Mansfield, with immortal courage.'"

My Uncle Abner lifted his face and looked out over the great valley, mellow with its ripened corn. His voice fell into a reflective note.

"The situation in this republic," he said, "is grave, and I am full of fear. In God's hands the thing would finally adjust itself. In God's slow, devious way it would finally come out all right. But neither you, Mansfield, nor the abolitionist, will leave the thing to God. You will rush in and settle it with violence. You will find a short cut of your own through God's deliberate way, and I tremble before the horror of blood that you would plunge us into."

He paused again, and his big, bronzed features had the serenity of some vast belief.

"To be fair," he said, "everywhere in this republic, to enforce the law everywhere, to put down violence, to try every man who takes the law in his own hand, fairly in the courts, and, if he is guilty, punish him without fear or favor, according to the letter of the statute, to keep everywhere a public sentiment of fair dealing, by an administration of justice above all public clamor—in this time of heat, this is our only hope of peace!"

He spoke in his deep, level voice, and the words seemed to be concrete things having dimensions and weight.

"Shall a fanatic who stirs up our slaves to murder," said Mansfield, "be tried like a gentleman before a jury?"

"Aye, Mansfield," replied my uncle, "like a gentleman, and before a jury! If the fanatic murders the citizen, I would hang him, and if the citizen murders the fanatic, I would hang him too, without one finger's weight of difference in the method of procedure. I would show New England that the justice of Virginia is even-eyed. And she would emulate that fairness, and all over the land the law would hold against the unrestraint that is gathering."

"Abner," cried Mansfield, "you are a dawdler like your god. I know a swifter way."

"I am ready to believe it," replied my uncle. "Who killed the mad abolitionist down yonder?"

"Who cares," said the old man, "since the beast is dead?"

"I care," replied Abner.

"Then, find it out, Abner, if you care," said the old man, snapping his jaws.

"I have found it out," said my uncle, "and it has happened in so strange a way, and with so curious an intervention, that I cannot save the State from shame."

"It happened in the simplest way imaginable," said Randolph. "The fool killed himself."

It was not an unthinkable conclusion. The whole land was wrought up to the highest tension. Men were beginning to hold their properties and their lives as of little account in this tremendous issue. The country was ready to flare up in a war, and to fire it the life of one man would be nothing. A thousand madmen were ready to make that sacrifice of life. That a fanatic would shoot himself in Virginia with the idea that the slave owners would be charged by the country with his murder and so the war brought on, was not a thing improbable in that day's extremity of passion. To the madman it would be only the slight sacrifice of his life for the immortal gain of a holy war.

My uncle looked at the Justice with a curious smile.

"I think Mansfield will hardly believe that," he said.

The old man laughed.

"It is a pretty explanation, Randolph," he said, "and I commend it to all men, but I do not believe it."

"Not believe it!" cried the Justice, looking first at my uncle and then at the old man. "Why, Abner, you said the woman spoke the truth!"

"She did speak it," replied my uncle.

"Damme, man!" cried the Justice. "Why do you beat about? If you believe the woman, why do you gentlemen disbelieve my conclusion on her words?"

"I disbelieve it, Randolph," replied my uncle, "for the convincing reason that I know who killed him."

"And I," cried Mansfield, "disbelieve it for an equally convincing reason—for the most convincing reason in the world, Randolph,"—and his big voice laughed in among the pillars and rafters of his porch—"because I killed him myself!"

Abner sat unmoving, and Randolph like a man past belief. The Justice fumbled with the pistol in his pocket, got it out,

and laid it on the flat arm on his chair, but he did not speak. The confession overwhelmed him.

The old man stood up, and the voice in his time-shaken body was Homeric:

"Ho! Ho!" he cried. "And so you thought I would be afraid, Randolph, and dodge about like your little men, shaken and overcome by fear." And he huddled in his shawl with a dramatic gesture.

"Fear!" And his laugh burst out again in a high staccato. "Even the devils in Abner's Christian hell lack that! I shot the creature, Randolph! Do you hear the awful words? And do you tremble for me, lest I hang and go to Abner's hell?"

The mock terror in the old man's voice and manner was compelling drama. He indicated the pistol on the chair arm.

"Yes," he said, "it is mine. Abner should have known it by the Mansfield arms."

"I did know it," replied my uncle.

The old man looked at the Justice with a queer ironical smile; then he went into the house.

"Await me, Randolph," he said. "I would produce the evidence and make out your case."

And prodded by the words, Randolph cursed bitterly.

"By the Eternal," he cried, "I am as little afraid as any of God's creatures, but the man confounds me!"

And he spoke the truth. He was a justice of the peace in Virginia when only gentlemen could hold that office. He lacked the balance and the ability of his pioneer ancestors, and he was given over to the vanity and the extravagance of words, but fear and all the manifestations of fear were alien to him.

He turned when the old man came out with a rosewood box in his hand, and faced him calmly.

"Mansfield," he said, "I warn you. I represent the law, and if you have done a murder, I will get you hanged."

The old man paused, and looked at Randolph with his maddening ironical smile.

"Fear again, eh, Randolph!" he said. "Is it by fear that you would always restrain me? Shall I be plucked back from the gibbet and Abner's hell only by this fear? It is a menace I have too long disregarded. You must give me a better reason."

Mansfield opened the rosewood box and took out a pistol like the one on the arm of Randolph's chair. He held the weapon lightly in his hand.

"The creature came here to harangue me," he said, "and like the genie in the copper pot, I gave him his choice of deaths."

He laughed, for the fancy pleased him.

"In the swirl of his heroics, Abner, I carried him the pistol yonder, to the steps of my portico where he stood, and with this other and my father's watch, I sat down here. 'After three minutes, sir,' I said, 'I shall shoot you down. It is my price for hearing your oration. Fire before that time is up. I shall call out the minutes for your convenience.'

"And so, I sat here, Abner, with my father's watch, while the creature ranted with my pistol in his hand.

"I called out the time, and he harangued me: 'The black of the Negro shall be washed white with blood!' And I answered him: 'One minute, sir!'

"'The Lord will make Virginia a possession for the bitter!' was his second climax, and I replied, 'Two minutes of your time are up!'

"'The South is one great brothel,' he shouted, and I answered, 'Three minutes, my fine fellow,' and shot him as I had promised! He leaped off into the darkness with my unfired pistol and fled to the cabin where you found him."

There was a moment's silence, and my uncle put out his arm and pointed down across the long meadow to a grim outline traveling far off on the road.

"Mansfield," he said, "you have lighted the powder train that God, at His leisure, would have dampened. You have broken the faith of the world in our sincerity. Virginia will be credited with this man's death, and we cannot hang you for it!"

"And why not?" cried Randolph, standing up. He had been prodded into unmanageable anger. "The Commonwealth has granted no letters of marque; it has proclaimed no outlawry. Neither Mansfield nor any other has a patent to do murder. I shall get him hanged!"

My uncle shook his head.

"No, Randolph," he said, "you cannot hang him."

"And why not?" cried the Justice of the Peace, aroused now, and defiant. "Is Mansfield above the law? If he kills this madman, shall he have a writ of exemption for it?"

"But he did not kill him!" replied my uncle.

Randolph was amazed. And Mansfield shook his head slowly, his face retaining its ironical smile.

"No, Abner," he said, "let Randolph have his case. I shot him."

Then he put out his hand, as though in courtesy, to my uncle. "Be at peace," he said. "If I were moved by fear, there is a greater near me than Randolph's gibbet. I shall be dead and buried before his grand jury can hold its inquisition."

"Mansfield," replied my uncle, "be yourself at peace, for you did not kill him."

"Not kill him!" cried the man. "I shot him thus!"

He sat down in his chair and taking the pistol out of the rosewood box, leveled it at an imaginary figure across the portico. The man's hand was steady and the sun glinted on the steel barrel.

"And because you shot thus," said Abner, "you did not kill him. Listen, Mansfield: the pistol that killed the Abolitionist was held upside down and close. The brand on the dead man's face is under the bullet hole. If the pistol had been held as usual, the brand would have been above it. It is a law of pistol wounds: as you turn the weapon, so will the brand follow. Held upside down, the brand was below the wound."

A deepening wonder came into the old man's ironical face.

"How did the creature die, then, if I missed him?"

Abner took up the weapon on the arm of Randolph's chair.

"The dead man did not shoot in Mansfield's fantastic duel," he said. "Nevertheless this pistol has been fired. And observe there is a smeared bloodstain on the sharp edges of the barrel. I think I know what happened..

"The madman with his pistol, overwrought, struggled in the cabin yonder to make himself a 'sacrifice of blood' and so bring on this war. Someone resisted his mad act—someone who seized the barrel of the pistol and in the struggle also got a wounded hand. Who in that cabin had a wounded hand, Randolph?"

"By the living God!" cried the Justice of the Peace. "The woman who plaited thorns! It was a blind to cover her injured hand!"

Abner looked out across the great meadows at a tiny figure far off, 'fading into the twilight of the distant road that led toward the Ohio.

"To cover her injured hand," he echoed, "and also, perhaps, who knows, to symbolize the dead man's mission, as she knew she saw it! The heart of a woman is the deepest of all God's riddles!"

The Adopted Daughter

"ISN'T SHE a beauty—eh, Randolph?"

Vespatian Flornoy had a tumbler of French brandy. He sucked in a mouthful. Then he put it on the table.

The house was the strangest in Virginia. It was of some foreign model. The whole second floor on the side lying toward the east was in two spacious chambers lighted with great casement windows to the ceiling. Outside, on this brilliant morning, the world was yellow and dried-up, sere and baked. But the sun was thin and the autumn air hard and vital.

My uncle, Squire Randolph, the old country doctor, Storm, and the host, Vespatian Flornoy, were in one of these enormous rooms. They sat about a table, a long mahogany piece made in England and brought over in a sailing ship. There were a squat bottle of French brandy and some tumblers. Flornoy drank and recovered his spirit of abandon.

Now he leered at Randolph, and at the girl that he had just called in.

He was a man one would have traveled far to see—yesterday or the day ahead of that. He had a figure out of Athens, a face cast in some forgotten foundry by the Arno, thick-curved mahogany-colored hair, and eyes like the velvet hull of an Italian chestnut. These excellencies the heavenly workman had turned out, and now by some sorcery of the pit they were changed into abominations.

Hell-charms, one thought of, when one looked the creature in the face. Drops of some potent liquor, and devil-words had done it, on yesterday or the day ahead of yesterday. Surely not the things that really had done it—time and the iniquities of Gomorrah. His stock and his fine ruffled shirt were soiled. His satin waistcoat was stained with liquor.

"A daughter of a French marquis, eh!" he went on. "Sold into slavery by a jest of the gods—stolen out of the garden of a convent! It's the fabled history of every octoroon in New Orleans!"

Fabled or not, the girl might have been the thing he said. The contour of the face came to a point at the chin, and the skin was a soft Oriental olive. She was the perfect expression of a type. One never could wish to change a line of her figure or a feature of her face. She stood now in the room before the door in the morning sun, in the quaint, alluring costume of a young girl of the time—a young girl of degree, stolen out of the garden of a convent! She had entered at Flornoy's drunken call, and there was the aspect of terror on her.

The man went on in his thick, abominable voice:

"My brother Sheppard, coming north to an inspection of our joint estate, presents her as his adopted daughter. But when he dropped dead in this room last night and I went about the preparation of his body for your inquisition—eh, what, my gentlemen! I find a bill of sale running back ten years, for the dainty baggage!

"French, and noble, stolen from the garden of a convent, perhaps! Perhaps! but not by my brother Sheppard. His adopted daughter—sentimentally, perhaps! Perhaps! But legally a piece of property, I think, descending to his heirs. Eh, Randolph!"

And he thrust a folded yellow paper across the table.

The Justice put down his glass with the almost untasted liquor in it, and examined the bill of sale.

"It is in form!" he said. "And you interpret it correctly, Flornoy, by the law's letter. But you will not wish to enforce it, I imagine!"

"And why not, Randolph?" cried the man.

The Justice looked him firmly in the face.

"You take enough by chance, sir. You and your brother Sheppard held the estate jointly at your father's death, and now at your brother's death you hold it as sole heir. You will not wish, also, to hold his adopted daughter."

Then he added:

"This bill of sale would hold in the courts against any un-indentured purpose, not accompanied by an intention expressed in some overt act. It would also fix the status of the girl against any pretended or legendary exemption of birth. The judges might believe that your brother Sheppard was convinced of this pretension when he rescued the child by purchase, and made his informal adoption at a tender age. But they would hold the paper, like a deed, irrevocable, and not to be disturbed by this conjecture."

"It will hold," cried the man, "and I will hold! You make an easy disclaimer of the rights of other men."

Then his face took on the aspect of a satyr's.

"Give her up, eh! to be a lady! Why Randolph, I would have given Sheppard five hundred golden eagles for this little beauty—five hundred golden eagles in his hand! Look at her, Randolph. You are not too old to forget the points—the trim ankle, the slender body, the snap of a thoroughbred. There's the blood of the French marquis, on my honor! A drop of black won't curdle it."

And he laughed, snapping his fingers at his wit.

"It only makes the noble lady merchandise! And perhaps, as you say, perhaps it isn't there, in fact. Egad! old man, I would have bid a thousand eagles if Sheppard had put her up. A thousand eagles! and I get her for nothing! He falls dead in my house, and I take her by inheritance."

It was the living truth. The two men, Vespatian Flornoy and his brother Sheppard, took their father's estate jointly at his death. They were unmarried, and now at the death of Sheppard, the surviving brother Vespatian was sole heir, under the law, to the dead man's properties: houses and lands and slaves. The bill of sale put the girl an item in the inventory of the dead man's estate, to descend with the manor-house and lands.

The thing had happened, as fortune is predisposed to change, in a moment, as by the turning of dice.

At daybreak on this morning Vespatian Flornoy had sent a Negro at a gallop, to summon the old country doctor, Storm, Squire Randolph and my Uncle Abner. At midnight, in this

chamber where they now sat, Sheppard as he got on his feet, with his candle, fell and died, Vespatian said, before he could reach his body. He lay now shaven and clothed for burial in the great chamber that adjoined.

Old Storm had stripped the body and found no mark. The man was dead with no scratch or bruise.

He could not say what vital organ had suddenly played out—perhaps a string of the heart had snapped. At any rate, the dead man had not gone out by any sort of violence, nor by any poison. Every drug or herb that killed left its stamp and superscription, old Storm said, and one could see it, if one had the eye, as one could see the slash of a knife or the bruise of an assassin's fingers.

It was plain death "by the Providence of God," was Randolph's verdict. So the Justice and old Storm summed up the thing and they represented the inquiry and the requirements of the law.

My uncle Abner made no comment on this conclusion. He came and looked and was silent. He demurred to the "Providence of God" in Randolph's verdict, with a great gesture of rejection. He disliked this term in any human horror. "By the abandonment of God," he said, these verdicts ought rather to be written. But he gave no sign that his objection was of any special tenor. He seemed profoundly puzzled.

When the girl came in, at Vespatian's command, to this appraisal, he continued silent. At the man's speech, and evident intent, his features and his great jaw hardened, as though under the sunburned skin the bony structure of the face were metal.

He sat in his chair, a little way out beyond the table, as he sat on a Sunday before the pulpit, on a bench, motionless, in some deep concern.

Randolph and Vespatian Flornoy were in this dialogue. Old Storm sat with his arms folded across his chest, his head down. His interest in the matter had departed with his inspection of the dead man, or remained in the adjoining chamber where the body lay, the eyelids closed forever on the land of living men, shut up tight like the shutters of a window in a house

of mystery. He only glanced at the girl with no interest, as at a bauble.

And now while the dialogue went on and Storm looked down his nose, the girl, silent and in terror, appealed to my uncle in a furtive glance, swift, charged with horror, and like a flash of shadow. The great table had a broad board connecting the carved legs beneath, a sort of shelf raised a little from the floor. In her glance, swift and fearful, she directed my uncle's attention to this board.

It was a long piece of veneered mahogany, making a shelf down the whole length of the table. On it my uncle saw a big folded cloth of squares white and black, and set a huge ivory chess-men. The cloth was made to spread across the top of the table, and the chess-men were of unusual size in proportion to the squares; the round knobs on the heads of the pawns were as big as marbles. Beside these things was a rosewood box for dueling-pistols, after the fashion of the time.

My uncle stooped over, took up these articles and set them on the table.

"And so, Flornoy," he said, "you played at chess with your brother Sheppard."

The man turned swiftly; then he paused and drank his glass of liquor.

"I entertained my brother," he said, "as I could; there is no coffee-house to enter, nor any dancing women to please the eye, in the mountains of Virginia."

"For what stake?" said my uncle.

"I have forgotten, Abner," replied the man, "—some trifle."

"And who won?" said my uncle.

"I won," replied the man. He spoke promptly.

"You won," said my uncle, "and you remember that; but what you won, you have forgotten! Reflect a little on it, Flornoy."

The man cursed, his face in anger.

"Does it matter, Abner, a thing great or small? It is all mine to-day!"

"But it was not all yours last night," said my uncle.

"What I won was mine," replied the man.

"Now, there," replied my uncle, "lies a point that I would amplify. One might win, but might not receive the thing one played for. One might claim it for one's own, and the loser might deny it. If the stake were great, the loser might undertake to repudiate the bargain. And how would one enforce it?"

The man put down his glass, leaned over and looked steadily at my uncle.

Abner slipped the silver hooks on the rosewood box, slowly, with his thumb and finger.

"I think," he said, "that if the gentleman you have in mind won, and were met with a refusal, he would undertake to enforce his claim, not in the courts or by any legal writ, but by the methods which gentlemen such as you have in mind are accustomed to invoke."

He opened the box and took out two pistols of the time. Then his face clouded with perplexity. Both weapons were clean and loaded.

The man, propping his wonderful face in the hollow of his hand, laughed. He had the face and the laughter of the angels cast out with Satan, when in a moment of some gain over the hosts of Michael they forgot the pit.

"Abner," he cried, "you are hag-ridden by a habit, and it leads you into the wildest fancies!"

His laughter chuckled and gurgled in his throat.

"Let me put your theory together. It is a very pretty theory, lacking in some trifles, but spirited and packed with dramatic tension. Let me sketch it out as it stands before your eye. . . . Have no fear, I shall not mar it by any delicate concern for the cunning villain, or any suppression of his evil nature. I shall uncover the base creature amid his deeds of darkness!"

He paused, and mocked the tragedy of actors.

"It is the hour of yawning graveyards—midnight in this house. Vespasian Flornoy sits at this table with his good brother Sheppard. He has the covetousness of David the son of Jesse, in his evil heart. He would possess the noble daughter of the Latin marquis, by a sardonic fate sold at childhood into slavery, but by the ever watchful Providence of God, for such

cases made and provided, purchased by the good brother Sheppard and adopted for his daughter!

"Mark, Abner, how beautifully it falls into the formula of the tragic poets!

"The wicked Vespasian Flornoy, foiled in every scheme of purchase, moved by the instigation of the Devil, and with no fear of God before his eyes, plays at chess with his good brother Sheppard, wins his interest in the manor-house and lands, and his last gold-piece—taunts and seduces him into a final game with everything staked against this Iphigenia. The evil one rises invisible but sulphurous to Vespasian's aid. He wins. In terror, appalled, aghast at the realization of his folly, the good brother Sheppard repudiates the bargain. They duel across the table, and Vespasian, being the better shot, kills his good brother Sheppard!

"Why, Abner, it is the plan of the 'Poetics.' It lacks no element of completeness. It is joined and fitted for the diction of Euripides!"

The man declaimed, his wonderful fouled face, his Adonis head with its thick curled hair, virile and spirited with the liquor and the momentum of his words. Old Storm gave no attention. Randolph listened as to the periods of an oration. And my uncle sat, puzzled, before the articles on the table. The girl now and then, when the speaker's eyes were on my uncle, by slight indicatory signs affirmed the speech, and continued strongly to indicate the chessmen.

My uncle began to turn the pieces over under the protection of his hand, idly, like one who fingers about a table in abstraction. Presently he stopped and covered one of the pieces with his hand. It was a pawn, large, like the other chessmen, but the round ivory knob at the top of it was gone. It had been sawed off!

The man Flornoy, consumed with his idea, failed to mark the incident, and moved by the tenor of his speech, went on:

"This is the Greek plan for a tragedy. It is the plan of Athens in the fifth century. It is the plan of Sophocles and Æschylus. Mark how it turns upon the Hellenic idea of a dominating Fate: a Fate in control over the affairs of men,

pagan and not good. The innocent and virtuous have no gain above the shrewd and wicked. The good Sheppard dies, and the evil Vespasian takes his daughter, his goods and lands to enjoy in a gilded life, long and happy!"

He thought the deep reflection in my uncle's face was confusion at his wit.

"That ending would not please you, Abner. Luther and Calvin and John Wesley have lived after Aristotle assembled this formula in his 'Poetics.' And they will have the evil punished—a dagger in the wicked Vespasian's heart, and the virgin slave, by the interposition of the will of Heaven, preserved in her virginity. And so you come, like the Providence of God, to set the thing in order!"

My uncle looked up at the man, his hand covering the mutilated pawn, his face calm in its profound reflection.

"You quote the tragic poets, with much pedantry," he said. "Well, I will quote them too: 'Ofttimes, to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truth!' How much truth, in all this discourse, have you told us?"

"Now, Abner," cried the man, "if it is truth you seek, and not the imaginations of a theory, how much could there be in it? If it were not for the granite ledges of reality, one might blow iris-colored bubbles of the fancy and watch them, in their beauty, journey to the stars! But alas, they collide with the hard edges of a fact and puff out.

"To begin with, the pistols have not been fired!"

"One could reload a pistol," replied my uncle.

"But one could not shoot a man, Abner, and leave no mark of the bullet on his body!"

He paused and addressed the old doctor.

"I sent for Storm, when I sent for Randolph, to rid me of every innuendo of a gossip. Ask him if there is a mark of violence on my brother's body."

The old man lifted his lined, withered face.

"There is no mark on him!" he said.

Vespasian Flornoy leaned across the table.

"Are you sure?" he said. "Perhaps you might be mistaken."

The words were in the taunting note of Elijah to the priests of Baal.

The old man made a decisive gesture. "*Voilà!*" he said, "I have handled a thousand dead men! I am not mistaken!"

Vespatian Flornoy put up his hands as in a great, hopeless gesture.

"Alas, Abner," he said, "we must give up this pretty theory. It does honor to your creative instinct, and save for this trifle, we might commend it to all men. But you see, Abner, Storm and the world will unreasonably insist that a bullet leaves a mark. I do not think we can persuade them against their experience in that belief. I am sorry for you, Abner. You have a reputation in Virginia to keep up. Let us think; perhaps there is a way around this disconcerting fact."

And he put his extended palm across his forehead, in mock reflection.

It was at this moment, when for an instant the man's face was covered, that the girl standing before the door made a strange indicatory signal to my Uncle Abner.

Vespatian Flornoy, removing his hand, caught a glimpse of the girl's after-expression. And he burst out in a great laugh, striking the table with his clenched hand.

"Egad!" he cried. "By the soul of Satan! the coy little baggage is winking at Abner!"

He saw only the final composition of the girl's face. He did not see the stress and vigor of the indicatory sign. He roared in a pretension of jealous anger.

"I will not have my property ogle another in my house. You shall answer for this, Abner, on the field of honor. And I warn you, sir: I have the surest eye and the steadiest hand in the mountains of Virginia."

It was the truth. The man was the wonder of the countryside. He could cut a string with a pistol at ten paces; he could drive in a carpet-tack with his bullet, across the room. With the weapon of the time, the creature was sure, accurate to a hair, and deadly.

"No man," he cried, "shall carry off this dainty baggage. Select your weapon, Abner; let us duel over this seduction!"

He spoke in the flippancies of jest. But my uncle's face was now alight with some great comprehensive purpose. It was like the face of one who begins to see the bulk and outlines of a

thing that before this hour, in spite of every scrutiny, was formless.

And to Flornoy's surprise and wonder, my uncle put out his hand, took up one of the pistols and suddenly fired it into the wood of the mantelpiece beyond the table. He got up and looked at the mark. The bullet was hardly bedded in the veneer.

"You use a light charge of powder, Flornoy," said my uncle.

The man was puzzled at this act, but he answered at once.

"Abner," he said, "that is a secret I have learned. A pistol pivots on the grip. In firing, there are two things to avoid: a jerk on the trigger, and the tendency of the muzzle to jump up, caused by the recoil of the charge. No man can control his weapon with a heavy charge of powder behind the bullet. If one would shoot true to a hair, one must load light."

It seemed a considerable explanation. And not one of the men who heard it ever knew whether it was, in fact, the controlling cause, or whether another and more subtle thing inspired it.

"But, Flornoy," said my uncle, "if to kill were the object of a duelist, such a charge of powder might defeat the purpose."

"You are mistaken, Abner," he said. "The body of a man is soft. If one avoids the bony structure, a trifling charge of powder will carry one's bullet into a vital organ. There is no gain in shooting through a man as though one were going to string him on a thread. Powder enough to lodge the bullet in the vital organ is sufficient."

"There might be a point in not shooting through him," said Abner.

The man looked calmly at my uncle; then he made an irrelevant gesture.

"No object, Abner, but no use. The whole point is to shoot to a hair, to lodge the bullet precisely in the point selected. Look how a light charge of powder does it."

And taking up the other pistol, he steadied it a moment in his hand, and fired at Abner's bullet-hole. No mark appeared on the mantel board. One would have believed that the bullet,

if the barrel held one, had wholly vanished. But when they looked closely, it was seen that my uncle's bullet, struck precisely, was driven a little deeper into the wood. It was amazing accuracy. No wonder the man's skill was a byword in the land.

My uncle made a single comment.

"You shoot like the slingers of Benjamin!" he said.

Then he came back to the table and stood looking down at the man. He held the mutilated ivory pawn in his closed left hand. The girl, like an appraised article, was in the doorway; Storm and Randolph looked on, like men before the blind moving of events.

"Flornoy," said Abner, "you have told us more truth than you intended us to believe. How did your brother Sheppard die?"

The man's face changed. His fingers tightened on the pistol. His eyes became determined and alert.

"Damme, man," he cried, "do you return to that! Sheppard fell and died, where you stand, beside the table in this room. I am no surgeon to say what disorder killed him. I sent for Storm to determine that."

My uncle turned to the old eccentric doctor.

"Storm," he said, "how did Sheppard Flornoy die?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders and put out his nervous hands.

"I do not know," he said, "the heart, maybe. There is no mark on him."

And here Randolph interrupted.

"Abner," he said, "you put a question that no man can answer: something snaps within the body, and we die. We have no hint at the cause of Sheppard's death."

"Why yes," replied my uncle, "I think we have."

"What hint?" said Randolph.

"The hint," said Abner, "that the eloquent Vespatian gave us just now in his discourse. I think he set out the cause in his apt recollection from the Book of Samuel."

He paused and looked down at the man.

Vespatian Flornoy got on his feet. His face and manner changed. There was now decision and menace in his voice.

"Abner," he said, "there shall be an end to this. I have turned your ugly hint with pleasantry, and met it squarely with indisputable facts. I shall not go any further on this way. I shall clear myself now, after the manner of a gentleman."

My uncle looked steadily at the man.

"Flornoy," he said, "if you would test your innocence by a device of the Middle Ages, I would suggest a simpler and swifter method of that time. Wager of battle is outlawed in Virginia. It is prohibited by statute, and we cannot use it. But the test I offer in its place is equally medieval. It is based on the same belief, old and persistent, that the Providence of God will indicate the guilty. And it is not against the law."

He paused.

"The same generation of men who believed in Wager of Battle, in the Morsel of Execration, in the red-hot plowshares, as a test of the guilt of murder, also believed that if the assassin touched his victim, the body of the murdered man would bleed!

"Flornoy," he said, "if you would have recourse to one of those medieval devices, let it be the last. . . . Go in with me and touch the body of your brother Sheppard, and I give you my word of honor that I will accept the decision of the test."

It was impossible to believe that my Uncle Abner trifled, and yet the thing was beyond the soundings of ail sense.

Storm and Randolph, and even the girl standing in the door, regarded him in wonder.

Vespasian Flornoy was amazed.

"Damme, man!" he cried, "superstitions have unhinged your mind. Would you believe in a thing like that?"

"I would rather believe it," replied my uncle, "than to believe that in a duel God would direct the assassin's bullet."

Then he added, with weight and decision in his voice:

"If you would be clear of my suspicion, if you would be free to take and enjoy the lands and properties that you inherit, go in before these witnesses and touch the dead body of your brother Sheppard. There is no mark appearing on him. Storm has found no wound to bleed. You are innocent of any measure in his death, you tell us. There's no peril to you, and I shall ride away to assure every man that Sheppard

Flornoy died, as Randolph has written, by the 'Providence of God.' "

He extended his arm toward the adjacent chamber, and across the table he looked Flornoy in the face.

"Go in before us and touch the dead man."

"By the soul of Satan!" cried the man, "if you hang on such a piece of foolery, you shall have it. The curse of superstition sticks in your fleece, Abner, like a burr."

He turned and flung open the door behind him and went in. The others followed—Storm and Randolph behind the man, the girl, shaken and fearful, and my Uncle Abner.

Sheppard Flornoy lay prepared for burial in the center of the room. The morning sun entering through the long windows flooded him with light; his features were sharply outlined in the mask of death, his eyelids closed.

They stood about the dead man, at peace in this glorious shroud of sun, and the living brother was about to touch him when my uncle put out his hand.

"Flornoy," he said, "the dead man ought to see who comes to touch him. I will open his eyes."

And at the words, for no cause or reason conceivable to the two men looking on, Vespasian Flornoy shouted with an oath, and ran in on my uncle.

He was big and mad with terror. But even in his youth and fury he was not a match for my Uncle Abner. Liquor and excess failed before wind and sun and the clean life of the hills. The man went down under my uncle's clenched hand, like an ox polled with a hammer.

It was Randolph who cried out, while the others crowded around the dead man and his brother unconscious on the floor.

"Abner, Abner," he said, "what is the answer to this ghastly riddle?"

For reply my uncle drew back the eyelids of the dead man. And stooping over, Randolph and old Storm saw that Sheppard Flornoy had been shot through the eye, and that the head of the ivory pawn had been forced into the bullet-hole to round out the damaged eyeball under the closed lid.

The girl sobbed, clinging to my uncle's arm. Randolph tore

the bill of sale into indistinguishable bits. And the old doctor Storm made a great gesture with his hands extended and crooked.

"Mon Dieu!" he cried, in a consuming revulsion of disgust. "My father was surgeon in the field for Napoleon, I was raised with dead men, and a drunken assassin fools me in the mountains of Virginia!"

Naboth's Vineyard

ONE HEARS a good deal about the sovereignty of the people in this republic; and many persons imagine it a sort of fiction, and wonder where it lies, who are the guardians of it, and how they would exercise it if the forms and agents of the law were removed. I am not one of those who speculate upon this mystery, for I have seen this primal ultimate authority naked at its work. And, having seen it, I know how mighty and how dread a thing it is. And I know where it lies, and who are the guardians of it, and how they exercise it when the need arises.

There was a great crowd, for the whole country was in the courtroom. It was a notorious trial.

Elihu Marsh had been shot down in his house. He had been found lying in a room, with a hole through his body that one could put his thumb in. He was an irascible old man, the last of his family, and so, lived alone. He had rich lands, but only a life estate in them, the remainder was to some foreign heirs. A girl from a neighboring farm came now and then to bake and put his house in order, and he kept a farm hand about the premises.

Nothing had been disturbed in the house when the neighbors found Marsh; no robbery had been attempted, for the man's money, a considerable sum, remained on him.

There was not much mystery about the thing, because the farm hand had disappeared. This man was a stranger in the hills. He had come from over the mountains some months before, and gone to work for Marsh. He was a big blond man, young and good looking; of better blood, one would say, than the average laborer. He gave his name as Taylor, but he was not communicative, and little else about him was known.

The country was raised, and this man was overtaken in the foothills of the mountains. He had his clothes tied into a bundle, and a long-barreled fowling-piece on his shoulder. The story he told was that he and Marsh had settled that morning, and he had left the house at noon, but that he had forgotten his gun and had gone back for it; had reached the house about four o'clock, gone into the kitchen, got his gun down from the dogwood forks over the chimney, and at once left the house. He had not seen Marsh, and did not know where he was.

He admitted that this gun had been loaded with a single huge lead bullet. He had so loaded it to kill a dog that sometimes approached the house, but not close enough to be reached with a load of shot. He affected surprise when it was pointed out that the gun had been discharged. He said that he had not fired it, and had not, until then, noticed that it was empty. When asked why he had so suddenly determined to leave the country, he was silent.

He was carried back and confined in the county jail, and now, he was on trial at the September term of the circuit court.

The court sat early. Although the judge, Simon Kilrail, was a landowner and lived on his estate in the country some half dozen miles away, he rode to the courthouse in the morning, and home at night, with his legal papers in his saddle-pockets. It was only when the court sat that he was a lawyer. At other times he harvested his hay and grazed his cattle, and tried to add to his lands like any other man in the hills, and he was as hard in a trade and as hungry for an acre as any.

It was the sign and insignia of distinction in Virginia to own land. Mr. Jefferson had annulled the titles that George the Third had granted, and the land alone remained as a patent of nobility. The Judge wished to be one of these landed gentry, and he had gone a good way to accomplish it. But when the court convened he became a lawyer and sat upon the bench with no heart in him, and a cruel tongue like the English judges.

I think everybody was at this trial. My Uncle Abner and the strange old doctor, Storm, sat on a bench near the center aisle of the court-room, and I sat behind them, for I was a

half-grown lad, and permitted to witness the terrors and severities of the law.

The prisoner was the center of interest. He sat with a stolid countenance like a man careless of the issues of life. But not everybody was concerned with him, for my Uncle Abner and Storm watched the girl who had been accustomed to bake for Marsh and red up his house.

She was a beauty of her type; dark haired and dark eyed like a gypsy, and with an April nature of storm and sun. She sat among the witnesses with a little handkerchief clutched in her hands. She was nervous to the point of hysteria, and I thought that was the reason the old doctor watched her. She would be taken with a gust of tears, and then throw up her head with a fine defiance; and she kneaded and knotted and worked the handkerchief in her fingers. It was a time of stress and many witnesses were unnerved, and I think I should not have noticed this girl but for the whispering of Storm and my Uncle Abner.

The trial went forward, and it became certain that the prisoner would hang. His stubborn refusal to give any reason for his hurried departure had but one meaning, and the circumstantial evidence was conclusive. The motive, only, remained in doubt, and the Judge had charged on this with so many cases in point, and with so heavy a hand, that any virtue in it was removed. The Judge was hard against this man, and indeed there was little sympathy anywhere, for it was a foul killing—the victim an old man and no hot blood to excuse it.

In all trials of great public interest, where the evidences of guilt overwhelmingly assemble against a prisoner, there comes a moment when all the people in the court-room, as one man, and without a sign of the common purpose, agree upon a verdict; there is no outward or visible evidence of this decision, but one feels it, and it is a moment of the tensest stress.

The trial of Taylor had reached this point, and there lay a moment of deep silence, when this girl sitting among the witnesses suddenly burst into a very hysteria of tears. She stood up shaking with sobs, her voice choking in her throat, and the tears gushing through her fingers.

What she said was not heard at the time by the audience in the court-room, but it brought the Judge to his feet and the jury crowding about her, and it broke down the silence of the prisoner, and threw him into a perfect fury of denials. We could hear his voice rise above the confusion, and we could see him struggling to get to the girl and stop her. But what she said was presently known to everybody, for it was taken down and signed; and it put the case against Taylor, to use a lawyer's term, out of court.

The girl had killed Marsh herself. And this was the manner and the reason of it: She and Taylor were sweethearts and were to be married. But they had quarreled the night before Marsh's death and the following morning Taylor had left the country. The point of the quarrel was some remark that Marsh had made to Taylor touching the girl's reputation. She had come to the house in the afternoon, and finding her lover gone, and maddened at the sight of the one who had robbed her of him, had taken the gun down from the chimney and killed Marsh. She had then put the gun back into its place and left the house. This was about two o'clock in the afternoon, and about an hour before Taylor returned for his gun.

There was a great veer of public feeling with a profound sense of having come at last upon the truth, for the story not only fitted to the circumstantial evidence against Taylor, but it fitted also to his story and it disclosed the motive for the killing. It explained, too, why he had refused to give the reason for his disappearance. That Taylor denied what the girl said and tried to stop her in her declaration, meant nothing except that the prisoner was a man, and would not have the woman he loved make such a sacrifice for him.

I cannot give all the forms of legal procedure with which the closing hours of the court were taken up, but nothing happened to shake the girl's confession. Whatever the law required was speedily got ready, and she was remanded to the care of the sheriff in order that she might come before the court in the morning.

Taylor was not released, but was also held in custody, although the case against him seemed utterly broken down. The Judge refused to permit the prisoner's counsel to take a

verdict. He said that he would withdraw a juror and continue the case. But he seemed unwilling to release any clutch of the law until some one was punished for this crime.

It was on our way, and we rode out with the Judge that night. He talked with Abner and Storm about the pastures and the price of cattle, but not about the trial, as I hoped he would do, except once only, and then it was to inquire why the prosecuting attorney had not called either of them as witnesses, since they were the first to find Marsh, and Storm had been among the doctors who examined him. And Storm had explained how he had mortally offended the prosecutor in his canvass, by his remark that only a gentleman should hold office. He did but quote Mr. Hamilton, Storm said, but the man had received it as a deadly insult, and thereby proved the truth of Mr. Hamilton's expression, Storm added. And Abner said that as no circumstance about Marsh's death was questioned, and others arriving about the same time had been called, the prosecutor doubtless considered further testimony unnecessary.

The Judge nodded, and the conversation turned to other questions. At the gate, after the common formal courtesy of the country, the Judge asked us to ride in, and, to my astonishment, Abner and Storm accepted his invitation. I could see that the man was surprised, and I thought annoyed, but he took us into his library.

I could not understand why Abner and Storm had stopped here, until I remembered how from the first they had been considering the girl, and it occurred to me that they thus sought the Judge in the hope of getting some word to him in her favor. A great sentiment had leaped up for this girl. She had made a staggering sacrifice, and with a headlong courage, and it was like these men to help her if they could.

And it was to speak of the woman that they came, but not in her favor. And while Simon Kilrail listened, they told this extraordinary story: They had been of the opinion that Taylor was not guilty when the trial began, but they had suffered it to proceed in order to see what might develop. The reason was that there were certain circumstantial evidences, overlooked by the prosecutor, indicating the guilt of the

woman and the innocence of Taylor. When Storm examined the body of Marsh he discovered that the man had been killed by poison, and was dead when the bullet was fired into his body. This meant that the shooting was a fabricated evidence to direct suspicion against Taylor. The woman had baked for Marsh on this morning, and the poison was in the bread which he had eaten at noon.

Abner was going on to explain something further, when a servant entered and asked the Judge what time it was. The man had been greatly impressed, and he now sat in a profound reflection. He took his watch out of his pocket and held it in his hand, then he seemed to realize the question and replied that his watch had run down. Abner gave the hour, and said that perhaps his key would wind the watch. The Judge gave it to him, and he wound it and laid it on the table. Storm observed my Uncle with, what I thought, a curious interest, but the Judge paid no attention. He was deep in his reflection and oblivious to everything. Finally he roused himself and made his comment.

"This clears the matter up," he said. "The woman killed Marsh from the motive which she gave in her confession, and she created this false evidence against Taylor because he had abandoned her. She thereby avenged herself desperately in two directions. . . . It would be like a woman to do this, and then regret it and confess."

He then asked my uncle if he had anything further to tell him, and although I was sure that Abner was going on to say something further when the servant entered, he replied now that he had not, and asked for the horses. The Judge went out to have the horses brought, and we remained in silence. My uncle was calm, as with some consuming idea, but Storm was as nervous as a cat. He was out of his chair when the door was closed, and hopping about the room looking at the law books standing on the shelves in their leather covers. Suddenly he stopped and plucked out a little volume. He whipped through it with his forefinger, smothered a great oath, and shot it into his pocket, then he crooked his finger to my uncle, and they talked together in a recess of the window until the Judge returned.

We rode away. I was sure that they intended to say something to the Judge in the woman's favor, for, guilty or not, it was a fine thing she had done to stand up and confess. But something in the interview had changed their purpose. Perhaps when they had heard the Judge's comment they saw it would be of no use. They talked closely together as they rode, but they kept before me and I could not hear. It was of the woman they spoke, however, for I caught a fragment.

"But where is the motive?" said Storm.

And my uncle answered, "In the twenty-first chapter of the Book of Kings."

We were early at the county seat, and it was a good thing for us, because the court-room was crowded to the doors. My uncle had got a big record book out of the county clerk's office as he came in, and I was glad of it, for he gave it to me to sit on, and it raised me up so I could see. Storm was there, too, and, in fact, every man of any standing in the county.

The sheriff opened the court, the prisoners were brought in, and the Judge took his seat on the bench. He looked haggard like a man who had not slept, as, in fact, one could hardly have done who had so cruel a duty before him. Here was every human feeling pressing to save a woman, and the law to hang her. But for all his hag-ridden face, when he came to act, the man was adamant.

He ordered the confession read, and directed the girl to stand up. Taylor tried again to protest, but he was forced down into his chair. The girl stood up bravely, but she was white as plaster, and her eyes dilated. She was asked if she still adhered to the confession and understood the consequences of it, and, although she trembled from head to toe, she spoke out distinctly. There was a moment of silence and the Judge was about to speak, when another voice filled the court-room. I turned about on my book to find my head against my Uncle Abner's legs.

"I challenge the confession!" he said.

The whole court-room moved. Every eye was on the two tragic figures standing up: the slim, pale girl and the big, somber figure of my uncle. The Judge was astounded.

"On what ground?" he said.

"On the ground," replied my uncle, "that the confession is a lie!"

One could have heard a pin fall anywhere in the whole room. The girl caught her breath in a little gasp, and the prisoner, Taylor, half rose and then sat down as though his knees were too weak to bear him. The Judge's mouth opened, but for a moment or two he did not speak, and I could understand his amazement. Here was Abner assailing a confession which he himself had supported before the Judge, and speaking for the innocence of a woman whom he himself had shown to be guilty and taking one position privately, and another publicly. What did the man mean? And I was not surprised that the Judge's voice was stern when he spoke.

"This is irregular," he said. "It may be that this woman killed Marsh, or it may be that Taylor killed him, and there is some collusion between these persons, as you appear to suggest. And you may know something to throw light on the matter, or you may not. However that may be, this is not the time for me to hear you. You will have ample opportunity to speak when I come to try the case."

"But you will never try this case!" said Abner.

I cannot undertake to describe the desperate interest that lay on the people in the courtroom. They were breathlessly silent; one could hear the voices from the village outside, and the sounds of men and horses that came up through the open windows. No one knew what hidden thing Abner drove at. But he was a man who meant what he said, and the people knew it.

The Judge turned on him with a terrible face.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I mean," replied Abner, and it was in his deep, hard voice, "that you must come down from the bench."

The Judge was in a heat of fury.

"You are in contempt," he roared. "I order your arrest. Sheriff!" he called.

But Abner did not move. He looked the man calmly in the face.

"You threaten me," he said, "but God Almighty threatens you." And he turned about to the audience. "The authority of the law," he said, "is in the hands of the electors of this county. Will they stand up?"

I shall never forget what happened then, for I have never in my life seen anything so deliberate and impressive. Slowly, in silence, and without passion, as though they were in a church of God, men began to get up in the courtroom.

Randolph was the first. He was a justice of the peace, vain and pompous, proud of the abilities of an ancestry that he did not inherit. And his superficialities were the annoyance of my Uncle Abner's life. But whatever I may have to say of him hereafter I want to say this thing of him here, that his bigotry and his vanities were builded on the foundations of a man. He stood up as though he stood alone, with no glance about him to see what other men would do, and he faced the Judge calmly above his great black stock. And I learned then that a man may be a blusterer and a lion.

Hiram Arnold got up, and Rockford, and Armstrong, and Alkire, and Coopman, and Monroe, and Elnathan Stone, and my father, Lewis, and Dayton and Ward, and Madison from beyond the mountains. And it seemed to me that the very hills and valleys were standing up.

It was a strange and instructive thing to see. The loud-mouthed and the reckless were in that courtroom, men who would have shouted in a political convention, or run howling with a mob, but they were not the persons who stood up when Abner called upon the authority of the people to appear. Men rose whom one would not have looked to see—the blacksmith, the saddler, and old Asa Divers. And I saw that law and order and all the structure that civilization had builded up, rested on the sense of justice that certain men carried in their breasts, and that those who possessed it not, in the crisis of necessity, did not count.

Father Donovan stood up; he had a little flock beyond the valley river, and he was as poor, and almost as humble as his Master, but he was not afraid; and Bronson, who preached Calvin, and Adam Rider, who traveled a Methodist circuit.

No one of them believed in what the other taught; but they all believed in justice, and when the line was drawn, there was but one side for them all.

The last man up was Nathaniel Davisson, but the reason was that he was very old, and he had to wait for his sons to help him. He had been time and again in the Assembly of Virginia, at a time when only a gentleman and landowner could sit there. He was a just man, and honorable and unafraid.

The Judge, his face purple, made a desperate effort to enforce his authority. He pounded on his desk and ordered the sheriff to clear the courtroom. But the sheriff remained standing apart. He did not lack for courage, and I think he would have faced the people if his duty had been that way. His attitude was firm, and one could mark no uncertainty upon him, but he took no step to obey what the Judge commanded.

The Judge cried out at him in a terrible voice.

"I am the representative of the law here. Go on!"

The sheriff was a plain man, and unacquainted with the nice expressions of Mr. Jefferson, but his answer could not have been better if that gentleman had written it out for him.

"I would obey the representative of the law," he said, "if I were not in the presence of the law itself!"

The Judge rose. "This is revolution," he said; "I will send to the Governor for the militia."

It was Nathaniel Davisson who spoke then. He was very old and the tremors of dissolution were on him, but his voice was steady.

"Sit down, your Honor," he said, "there is no revolution here, and you do not require troops to support your authority. We are here to support it if it ought to be lawfully enforced. But the people have elevated you to the Bench because they believed in your integrity, and if they have been mistaken they would know it." He paused, as though to collect his strength, and then went on. "The presumptions of right are all with your Honor. You administer the law upon our authority and we stand behind you. Be assured that we will not suffer our authority to be insulted in your person." His voice

grew deep and resolute. "It is a grave thing to call us up against you, and not lightly, nor for a trivial reason shall any man dare to do it." Then he turned about. "Now, Abner," he said, "what is this thing?"

Young as I was, I felt that the old man spoke for the people standing in the courtroom, with their voice and their authority, and I began to fear that the measure which my uncle had taken was high handed. But he stood there like the shadow of a great rock.

"I charge him," he said, "with the murder of Elihu Marsh! And I call upon him to vacate the Bench."

When I think about this extraordinary event now, I wonder at the calmness with which Simon Kilrail met this blow, until I reflect that he had seen it on its way, and had got ready to meet it. But even with that preparation, it took a man of iron nerve to face an assault like that and keep every muscle in its place. He had tried violence and had failed with it, and he had recourse now to the attitudes and mannerisms of a judicial dignity. He sat with his elbows on the table, and his clenched fingers propping up his jaw. He looked coldly at Abner, but he did not speak, and there was silence until Nathaniel Davisson spoke for him. His face and his voice were like iron.

"No, Abner," he said, "he shall not vacate the Bench for that, nor upon the accusation of any man. We will have your proofs, if you please."

The Judge turned his cold face from Abner to Nathaniel Davisson, and then he looked over the men standing in the courtroom.

"I am not going to remain here," he said, "to be tried by a mob, upon the *viva voce* indictment of a bystander. You may nullify your court, if you like, and suspend the forms of law for yourselves, but you cannot nullify the constitution of Virginia, nor suspend my right as a citizen of that commonwealth.

"And now," he said, rising, "if you will kindly make way, I will vacate this courtroom, which your violence has converted into a chamber of sedition."

The man spoke in a cold, even voice, and I thought he

had presented a difficulty that could not be met. How could these men before him understand to keep the peace of this frontier, and force its lawless elements to submit to the forms of law for trial, and deny any letter of those formalities to this man? Was the grand jury, and the formal indictment, and all the right and privilege of an orderly procedure for one, and not for another?

It was Nathaniel Davisson who met this dangerous problem.

"We are not concerned," he said, "at this moment with your rights as a citizen; the rights of private citizenship are inviolate, and they remain to you, when you return to it. But you are not a private citizen. You are our agent. We have selected you to administer the law for us, and your right to act has been challenged. Well, as the authority behind you, we appear and would know the reason."

The Judge retained his imperturbable calm.

"Do you hold me a prisoner here?" he said.

"We hold you an official in your office," replied Davisson, "not only do we refuse to permit you to leave the courtroom, but we refuse to permit you to leave the Bench. This court shall remain as we have set it up until it is our will to readjust it. And it shall not be changed at the pleasure or demand of any man but by us only, and for a sufficient cause shown to us."

And again I was anxious for my uncle, for I saw how grave a thing it was to interfere with the authority of the people as manifested in the forms and agencies of the law. Abner must be very sure of the ground under him.

And he was sure. He spoke now, with no introductory expressions, but directly and in the simplest words.

"These two persons," he said, indicating Taylor and the girl, "have each been willing to die in order to save the other. Neither is guilty of this crime. Taylor has kept silent, and the girl has lied, to the same end. This is the truth: There was a lovers' quarrel, and Taylor left the country precisely as he told us, except the motive, which he would not tell lest the girl be involved. And the woman, to save him, confesses to a crime that she did not commit.

"Who did commit it?" He paused and included Storm with

a gesture. "We suspected this woman because Marsh had been killed by poison in his bread, and afterwards mutilated with a shot. Yesterday we rode out with the Judge to put those facts before him." Again he paused. "An incident occurring in that interview indicated that we were wrong; a second incident assured us, and still later, a third convinced us. These incidents were, first, that the Judge's watch had run down; second, that we found in his library a book with all the leaves in it uncut, except at one certain page; and, third, that we found in the county clerk's office an unindexed record in an old deed book." There was deep quiet and he went on:

"In addition to the theory of Taylor's guilt or this woman's, there was still a third; but it had only a single incident to support it, and we feared to suggest it until the others had been explained. This theory was that some one, to benefit by Marsh's death, had planned to kill him in such a manner as to throw suspicion on this woman who baked his bread, and finding Taylor gone, and the gun above the mantel, yielded to an afterthought to create a further false evidence. It was overdone!

"The trigger guard of the gun in the recoil caught in the chain of the assassin's watch and jerked it out of his pocket; he replaced the watch, but not the key which fell to the floor, and which I picked up beside the body of the dead man."

Abner turned toward the judge.

"And so," he said, "I charge Simon Kilrail with this murder; because the key winds his watch; because the record in the old deed book is a conveyance by the heirs of Marsh's lands to him at the life tenant's death; and because the book we found in his library is a book on poisons with the leaves uncut, except at the very page describing that identical poison with which Elihu Marsh was murdered."

The strained silence that followed Abner's words was broken by a voice that thundered in the courtroom. It was Randolph's.

"Come down!" he said.

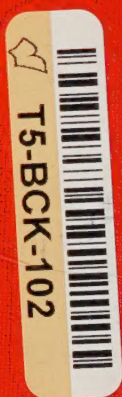
And this time Nathaniel Davisson was silent.

The Judge got slowly on his feet, a resolution was forming in his face, and it advanced swiftly.

"I will give you my answer in a moment," he said.

Then he turned about and went into his room behind the Bench. There was but one door, and that opening into the court, and the people waited.

The windows were open and we could see the green fields, and the sun, and the far-off mountains, and the peace and quiet and serenity of autumn entered. The Judge did not appear. Presently there was the sound of a shot from behind the closed door. The sheriff threw it open, and upon the floor, sprawling in a smear of blood, lay Simon Kilrail, with a dueling pistol in his hand.



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